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MY TRUE KNIGHT.

A Novel.

BY

DORA VERE.

'It occupies me to turn back regards
On what I have seen or pondered sad or cheery,
And what I write, I cast upon the stream
To swim or sink; I have had at least my dream.'
BYRON.

IN TWO VOLUMES.
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MY TRUE KNIGHT.

CHAPTER I.

'Sweet soul, do with me as thou wilt,
I lull a fancy, trouble-tossed;
With love too precious to be lost,
A little grain shall not be spilt.
* * * * *
'Since we deserved the name of friends,
And thine effect so lives in me,
A part of mine may live in thee,
And move thee on to noble ends.'

TENNYSON.

'Do play something lively, Miss Fane!' exclaims Florence Trevor, on the last evening that is to be brightened by the

presence of guests at the Hall for some time to come; 'I have got a most awfully shocking fit of the blues! I wish we could all have gone at the same time.'

Captain Walters comes to the piano.

'Will you play the "Blue Danube"?' he says softly. 'You played it the first night I came; I want to go away with the old sweet notes ringing in my ears.'

'Yes,' I say, smiling; 'but it is not lively, I am afraid it will not suit Miss Trevor.'

He looks round.

'She is gone,' he says quickly; 'fate is for once kind—we are alone.'

Lady Trevor is suffering from one of her nervous attacks, and has not appeared all day. Sir John is closeted in private confab with the steward, and Miss Alling-

ton has for some unknown reason disappeared.

'So we are,' I return nervously; and then, to avoid further conversation, I begin to play what always seems to me one of the sweetest, dreamiest airs that was ever composed.

My companion buries his face in his hands, and is silent. With the last note he raises it.

'Thank you,' he says, smiling. 'I think that would calm the greatest tumult that ever filled one's heart; in every note there is peace.'

The music has also had its effect on me. A deep, intense pity fills my heart for the man who has been so unselfishly good to me.

His voice again breaks the silence.

'I have been wondering if I shall ever see you after I am gone,' he is saying anxiously, looking at me. 'I should like to know that you are well, and getting along bearably. I don't think it will be so bad for you when we have all gone, only it will be horribly dismal.'

'Oh, I shall get on famously!' I say, smiling. 'I shall have all my own way, and the children will keep me alive; besides, do you know what I am going to do next holidays?'

'No,' very eagerly. 'What?'

'You must guess.'

'Take the children to the sea, perhaps.'

'No; better than that.'

'I am so glad! What can it be?'

'Something *delightful*,' I say, laughing outright. 'You *must* guess!'

'You are going to visit some one?'

'Yes; but whom?'

'How can I tell?—I don't know your friends,' rather jealously.

'Yes, you do, all I have left,' I say; 'and they amount to exactly two, and I am going to visit one of them.'

'Where does the friend live?—in town?' he asks eagerly. 'Perhaps I may see you.'

'Yes; she has a house in town, and another somewhere else.'

'In what part of London is her house?'

'Queen's Gate.'

'You do not mean Miss Allington?'

'Yes, I do; is not it good of her?'

But he does not answer, only a bright glad light comes into his face.

'Is it not good of her?' I repeat.

'Then I *shall* see you,' he says, not paying any attention to my question.

'Probably, if you are in town,' I say.

Then I begin to play again. This time it is a little piece I composed myself in the twilight at home one summer evening, and every note speaks to me of Jeffery. It goes quite deep into my heart, and when I raise my eyes, I find that I am looking at my companion through a mist of tears.

He gives a sharp cry of pain, and half stretches out his hand towards me, then with a strong effort controls himself, and turning away his head, says huskily :

'If you can help it, for pity's sake don't do that.'

'It is nothing,' I say quickly; 'only old recollections.'

After a time he speaks again.

'You told me a few minutes ago that you had two friends. Miss Allington was one. If I see the other, if I can make an opportunity of doing so, you will give me leave to explain, and to try to set things right, will not you?' he asks.

'I meant you were my other friend,' I say dreamily. 'I have no others left now.'

'I?' he cries joyfully. '*I* your friend? Then you do not really hate me as much as you did! Are you *sure?*'

'Quite sure,' I say, with emphasis. 'I like you very, very much.'

'I would give a good deal to hear you say that,' he says softly. 'Shall we make

a compact? shall we promise *always* to be friends?'

'Yes,' I respond, holding out my hand; 'if you will have me for your friend.'

Then he takes my hand in his warm strong grasp, and looking at me with the love-light burning brightly in his grey eyes, says solemnly:

'Always friends, for ever, and ever.'

And I repeat after him:

'Always, for ever and ever.'

* * * * *

'What a charming air you were playing just now!' exclaims Florence Trevor, as she enters the room with a bounce. 'A symphony in two flats, was not it? I think you have played it once or twice before, Miss Fane.'

'I was not playing at all,' I stammer, blushing furiously.

'There, don't blush, child,' she says, laughing good-naturedly, and pinching my ear. 'One must make a feeble joke at some one's expense, you know, or die of the mopes. How thankful I am we shall all have gone the day after to-morrow!'

* * * * *

And now they *have* all gone, only the children and I remaining behind, with a very reduced allowance of servants, and two large dog for our protection, for several weeks to come.

In the evening, when the children have gone to bed, I wander through the almost deserted house in a listless, desolate sort of way. I don't think I ever quite realized

the depressing effect such a state of things would have on my spirits, which just now are not the brightest. I can hear my own footfall echo along the empty noiseless passages as if some one were for ever dogging my steps, and turning hastily round, find myself only face to face with space.

Once or twice I have been reduced to the society of Mrs. Prodgers, the housekeeper, to escape my own gloomy thoughts and the eternal monotony of silence.

Sometimes I go and sit beside Jack's little bed, and watch his sleeping angel face, and wonder what his life will be? and if he will grow selfish and unloving like the others?—Jack, who is always so thoroughly the reverse.

Then I fall to wondering if he will die

young, and cry copiously over the prospect of his youthful demise. In this cheerful frame of mind I steal softly from the room, and wander downstairs. The old desire, daily gratified, to look into the drawing-room and picture the last evening Jeffery and I were there together, takes possession of me.

I softly turn the handle and open the door, which creaks in an unpleasant ghostly way. (I never noticed before how horribly the hinges must require oiling.) All the furniture, covered with white dust-sheets, takes grotesque forms. I fancy the sofa looks like a coffin. I have left the door open, that the light from the lamp in the hall may serve as a light for the drawing-room too, but the effect is scarcely exhilarating.

Lady Trevor charged me to look after the piano, and see that it did not suffer from the damp. I throw the sheet which covered it upon the floor. Yes, it is decidedly a good idea: I will play, and try to silence some of the dreary moanings and unpleasant creakings of the old Hall. I will play the same pieces as I did on *that* evening. The china shakes as I break the silence, and bring my fingers down sharply on the keys. Then the 'Soldier's Chorus' fills the deserted room, and piece after piece follows.

I can see them all once again: Jeffery standing by the piano, reminding me of my promise, which was so miserably broken. Then I see him return to Lady Mabel, with a cold bow to me, *the governess.* I wonder, if I had done as he asked me, and

married him, if he would ever have felt ashamed that I had once been a governess? He is very proud. How would he have borne to hear people say, 'Oh yes, don't you know!—she was only the Trevors' governess! Quite a romance altogether. Rather a come-down for Walsingham's pride.'

I feel the hot blood mount to my face. What have I been dreaming of? I must have been mad all these miserable weeks. I must have been mad when I promised to meet him at the old ruin. It was *this* I was dreaming of—this humiliation—this cruel, undeniable fact that, whatever my former position may have been, I am only Lady Trevor's governess now, and if Jeffery married me, society would look askance at me in consequence, giving that

feeble toleration, because I was his wife, which would be gall and wormwood to him every hour of the day.

What miserable, puny, selfish love mine must be, which could forget what it would cost its object! No doubt he sees by this time the folly of it, and is grateful to me for sparing him the social humiliation which such an alliance would entail. And then over the bitterness of my soul the words come like a soothing balm:

'I think that would calm the greatest tumult that ever filled one's heart. In every note there is peace.'

And then I know that unconsciously my fingers have strayed over the keys, and that I have somehow drifted into the 'Blue Danube.'

I wonder where Captain Walters is. I

wonder what he would have done if he had been in Jeffery's place. I think he would have tried to see me again, even though I broke my promise. It was certainly a trying test to a proud, impulsive man like Jeffery. But love breaks down all barriers —lives through all tests. I know at the bottom of my heart Captain Walters in Jeffery's place would have stayed.

A step in the hall makes me start from my meditations. Who can it be? I half rise from the music-stool, and encounter the grim face of Bagstock, the butler.

'A letter for you, miss,' he says, slightly relaxing the muscles of his visage.

I take it up quickly, and see it is from Florence Trevor.

'Who brought it?' I ask. 'I don't

understand how it can have come at this time of night.'

'Well, miss,' says Bagstock, gradually veering towards the servants'-hall expression, and suppressing a grin, 'you see, Tummas rode into Bidsley this afternoon, and as there was a communication expected from Sir John, he called for the second-post letters. Tummas was rather late back, miss; in fact, he has only just come.'

'Oh, I see. Very well, Bagstock.'

Feeling himself dismissed, he slowly departs. Evidently Bagstock, off duty, is of a communicative turn—possibly jocose, below stairs. In his official capacity he is rigid as marble, grim as Cerberus. Therefore the jocose and familiar side of his character is decidedly a revelation. Ob-

viously he and the other servants look upon me (with a dash of condescension) as one of themselves.

I take my letter upstairs to the school-room, turn up the lamp, and sit down to read it.

'DEAR MISS FANE,

'Mamma, having one of her wretched nervous attacks, does not feel equal to sending her weekly dose of orders concerning the children, etc., so I have the duty to perform.

'You will see we are once more in town; I can scarcely believe it is six weeks since we left home. We had a very jolly visit at the Duke's. The Duchess remarkable as usual concerning headgear, dear old

soul! and decidedly improved by three new teeth.

'We had a few days' hunting. Julia Featherstone was there, amiable as ever, and pursuing Lord Selwin with a pertinacity worthy of herself. Lord Selwin is really quite too awfully jolly. I like him more than ever. But really he is very naughty to make such fun of poor Julia.

'By-the-bye, I saw Lady Witherem-Brown in such a charming costume! I did so wish you could have seen it—it was my style exactly, and I am sure you could have imitated it for me; I always said, you know, that you were degrees above Parker in taste and style. That wretched S—— has charged such an unconscionable price for my olive-green and salmon brocade, mamma vows positively that I

must find a cheaper dressmaker; but really her style is unimpeachable, and one must expect to pay for that.

'I think it is now quite decided that after the season we go to Italy. I am positively dying for a glimpse of an Italian sky, and I think Lord Selwin may go with us.

'Did I tell you in my last letter that Sir Jeffery Walsingham had returned? (I dare say you may remember seeing him at our house.) If he did not look so persistently well and happy, I should certainly say he was a little mad; as it is, he must be called a creature of impulse.

'The Caustons, hearing he had suddenly flown abroad for an indefinite time, were considerably amazed to receive a letter from him, dated Paris, calmly stating that

he hoped to arrive at their place on the day appointed, and was looking forward very much to seeing them. He gave no reason for his eccentric departure or return.

'He duly arrived, and has been dancing attendance on the fair Mabel ever since, who is in the seventh heaven of bliss. There is no doubt it is a case; in fact, it is currently reported that they are engaged.

'I wonder if the wedding will come off this season? If I am asked to be a bridesmaid, I hope they will not choose pink—it destroys me utterly.

'I really must give over gossiping now. Mamma says I am to tell you to get the children's boots at Piggings', in Bidsley. Why does the man persist in insulting

humanity by possessing such an atrocious name?

'Yours truly,

'FLORENCE TREVOR.'

I still sit there, with the letter in my hand, gazing into the fire. It has come then!

The last faint glimmer of hope is extinguished for ever!

I must never think of Jeffery now, never! Before it was madness—folly—what you will; now it is sin—for is he not the promised husband of another woman?

Then I drop my aching head in my hands, with a bitter, tearless cry:

'Heaven help me, for I am indeed desolate!'

CHAPTER II.

'I live but in the sound; it is thy voice.'

BYRON.

IT is the end of June. Bright, sunny, leafy June.

How we hailed the first suggestion of spring, and watched the bare trees breaking out in their holiday garb; how we longed for the time when we might take long rambles, gathering handfuls of wild-flowers and ferns, and sit down to rest under the shady branches of the magnificent old trees!

There is something exhilarating about

spring, after the dreary gloom of winter, the dark days, and, to me, long solitary evenings. I feel, in spite of the dull aching at my heart, that has become such a familiar pain, less crushed by it. I begin to think certainty, however bad, is easier to bear than suspense; but still I know that something has gone out of my life—a ray of hope that was such exquisite pain. Now there is a blank. The hands of the clock still go round, but one figure is missing!

'Miss Fane, it is exactly five minutes to four,' says Mabel, endeavouring to roll the corner of a dilapidated spelling-book between her finger and thumb. 'May we put the books away now, and go out?'

'Yes,' I say smiling, as a ray of sunlight flashes into my face; 'we will go out now.'

And we go.

The children run before me, gathering wild flowers, and taxing my botanical knowledge to its widest limit to class and name them.

I get fairly through Jack's minute examination and rather posing questions without having to make any terrible confession of ignorance, and am fairly launched on a voyage of discovery on the top of a high bank overlooking the road, when Mabel makes me return to my perpendicular position with a jerk by exclaiming:

'Look, Miss Fane! there is Captain Walters.'

With a very red face and unclean fingers, I endeavour to descend from my exalted position, for I can see coming

down the road a horse, the rider of which is undoubtedly my old friend.

Almost before I can do so, however, he has overtaken me and sprung from his horse.

'How glad I am to see you!' he is saying, clasping my earth-stained fingers tightly with one hand, and the bridle of his steed with the other; 'do you know, I have ridden this way every day for a week, thinking there might be a chance of seeing you, and until to-day I have had to content myself with a solitary ride!'

I raise my eyes to his face, and in spite of the smile that this unexpected encounter has brought into it, I see, with a pang of keen reproach, that he is changed since I saw him last. He looks older, and there is a settled sadness in his eyes that makes my heart ache.

'You are visiting in the neighbourhood, I suppose?' I say, breaking an awkward pause, during which I have read more than I care to know in his face.

'Yes, at Major Brook's.'

'Are you staying there for long?'

'No; I am shortly going to Town. The fact is,' he goes on nervously, 'I had a fancy for taking a peep at you and seeing how you were getting on; so when Brooks asked me down, I thought I would embrace the opportunity. I did not call upon you, because I thought Mrs. Grundy, or some other equally amiable person, might have something to say about it.'

'Oh!' I say, laughing uneasily, and turning away my head; 'it was very good of you to think of it. I am getting on all right.'

'Are you not wretchedly dull?'

'Sometimes. I felt much worse at first, but now we almost live out of doors, and you know fresh air is the best possible cure for depression.'

'Is it?' he asks musingly.

The children, after an effusive greeting, have returned to the interesting treasures growing at the bottom of a dry ditch, and as far as conversational purposes go Captain Walters and I are alone.

A cold, nervous trembling comes over me, for I am longing, yet fearing, to ask him the question which I know he can answer—Is the time fixed for Jeffery's marriage with Lady Mabel Causton?

Once, twice, I open my lips to speak, and then I close them again without having uttered a word.

He, too, seems constrained; he is looking straight before him, and evidently ransacking his brains for a commonplace observation. The intention is good, but fails signally to meet with success. There is another awkward pause. Yes, I *will*, I *must* ask him!

'Captain Walters,' I begin, 'have you been in town lately?'

'Yes.'

'Have you seen the Trevors?'

I am getting on a little better now. I think perhaps he will help me. I look at him, but his eyes are still persistently fixed on vacancy.

'Yes, I called upon them.'

'Did you see any of the people who were staying here in the winter?' I falter.

'Oh yes; Miss Allington, of course.'

'Oh yes, of course!' I repeat; then, going on quickly, 'and Lord Selwin and Miss Featherstone and—and Lady Mabel. I suppose you saw Lady Mabel? Florence Trevor said she was in town.'

'Oh yes; most people are in town. Who is that angular spinster?' he cries suddenly, with decided relief in his voice, bringing his face back from the clouds to me.

I look up.

'That is Miss MacGregor,' I answer, trying to speak carelessly, and making a decided hash of the clumsy attempt, 'the vicar's sister; were you not introduced to her when you were down here before?'

'No; I have never seen her till now—you know her, I suppose?'

'Oh yes; she is the only spirit from the

outside world we see to enliven our solitude.'

'Good heavens!'

'She really is very kind,' I say, laughing; 'only rather peculiar.'

'I should fancy so; she looks as if she went in for woman's rights—does she?'

'Oh dear no, only for botany; that accounts for the mania developing itself in the juvenile mind,' I return, looking at the children. 'She is writing a book on the subject, and has really a very valuable dried collection of specimens.'

'Does she intend to complete the collection by adding herself as the coping stone?'

'No, I think not; only her portrait on the first page of the book.'

'That will doubtless insure a ready sale.'

'Shall I tell her you would like a copy?' I ask, looking mischievously at him.

'Certainly, if I shall not be expected to read it.'

'If you are awfully polite,' I say with emphasis, 'and take an extraordinary interest in botany, perhaps she will ask you to tea.'

'Really? a delightful *tête-à-tête*, I suppose; or does the brother indulge in afternoon tea as well?'

'Oh yes! certainly. But it will not be a *tête-à-tête* if he does not. We are going.'

'You?' very eagerly. 'That alters the case. Do you often go?'

'Yes; she is really very kind. Even a person with a hobby is better than no one at all.'

'Query!'

'Ah!' I say, with conviction, 'you have not tried the alternative, or you would agree with me.'

'Very possibly. Here she comes! Good gracious! a Scotchwoman every inch of her!'

'There are a great many Scotch inches, then,' I say, laughing; 'for she is five feet ten and a half.'

I must admit the personal appearance of Miss MacGregor is not prepossessing. She has a bitter antipathy to fashion in the choice of her garments: for twenty years they have been made in precisely the same style, and are, from their length and width, admirably adapted for accomplishing any ascent or descent to which her botanical wanderings may lead her. She

wears hobnail boots, and carries in her hand a spud.

She swings the spud to and fro in fine weather, just as she swings her umbrella in wet. She eyes Captain Walters curiously, with a certain degree of suspicion. To Miss MacGregor's mind, there is evidently something clandestine going on which she feels it her duty to investigate.

'How do you do, Miss Fane?' she says, shaking hands with me, and favouring my companion with a cold stare.

'Allow me to introduce Captain Walters to you,' I say. 'I think you must have seen him last winter when he was staying at the Hall.'

'As a guest of Sir John Trevor, I presume?' observes Miss MacGregor stiffly. 'Yes, I believe I saw you in church.'

'I am so glad to have this opportunity of making your acquaintance,' says Captain Walters eagerly. 'Miss Fane and I are very old friends,'—Oh, Cyril! very old?—'I was fortunate enough to meet her this afternoon; she has been giving me a most interesting account of your botanical collection.'

'Ah!' says Miss MacGregor, thawing perceptibly; '*you* are a botanist, perhaps?'

'A very modest one,' smiles Cyril. 'I have only quite lately taken up the subject, but I find it a most interesting one.'

Between the effort of trying to look serious, and the certain knowledge that sooner or later Cyril must come to signal grief, and betray his total ignorance of the subject, I nearly bite my lip through.

'What class of vegetation do you find

the most entertaining?' inquires Miss MacGregor, delighted at having lighted on a kindred spirit, and determined to make the most of him.

'I am afraid at present I do not feel myself competent to give an opinion. My researches have as yet been limited.'

'There is a wide field for cultivation.'

Whether she refers to the uncultivated field of Captain Walters' mind, or the field of botanical research, she does not explain.

'The dear children are, I see, profitably employing their leisure hours.'

'Yes; they are very much interested in all you have told them.'

We are walking slowly along towards the Vicarage, I between my two companions. Still Captain Walters shows no signs of departing; he evidently intends

to victimise himself to botany and tea, should the opportunity present itself.

'Perhaps you have heard,' says Miss MacGregor, who has by this time satisfied herself that Cyril has no designing motives, and is decidedly a young man to be cultivated, 'perhaps you have heard I have a *cacoëthes scribendi*?'

'Indeed! have you?' he exclaims, possessed by a hazy idea that it is some rare plant that he ought to be acquainted with. 'How very interesting! Is it a good specimen?'

'Well, that is a question which it would scarcely become me to answer,' replies Miss MacGregor; 'others will doubtless criticise my poor efforts.'

This reply somewhat confuses Cyril. There is an uncomfortable pause. Then

he says, having evidently hit upon a bright idea:

'I think I must have seen it somewhere. Rather long, and very green, is not it? I mean the leaves are——'

Before he can finish, I stop him.

'You misunderstood Miss MacGregor. She said a *cacoëthes scribendi*—a taste for scribbling, you know.'

'Oh yes, of course! Ten thousand pardons! I did not catch the name—I mean the word!' flounders Cyril, with an it's-all-up look at me.

I hasten to change the subject.

'Did I tell you, Miss MacGregor, that I am really going to London next holidays?'

'Indeed? No, I do not recollect that you did. I fear it is but the lap of vice and luxury.'

By this time we have reached the Vicarage.

'You are, I suppose, visiting in this neighbourhood?' continues Miss MacGregor, addressing Cyril.

'Yes; I am staying at Major Brook's.'

'If you have leisure, my brother and I will be proud if you will drink tea with us.'

'Thanks!' cries Cyril, brightening perceptibly; 'nothing will give me greater pleasure. I have plenty of time.'

Miss MacGregor and the children go towards the house, and in a few minutes the vicar's man-of-all-work relieves Cyril of his horse.

'What a delightful old-fashioned garden,' he exclaims, as we stroll along the gravel-path, with variegated laurels on each side

of us, towards the ivy-covered porch; 'decidedly rural felicity.'

'Yes, it does not remind one of Covent Garden,' I say, smiling; 'but it has a quiet, peaceful beauty of its own that one never feels with the din of the great city ringing in one's ears.'

'It is difficult to find peace anywhere,' says my companion moodily. 'I think, in my present frame of mind, inaction and solitude would drive me mad. I cannot rest; excitement is the prescription that suits me best.'

'I did not know you were such a dissipated individual.'

'I am not dissipated,' he corrects quickly; 'do not fancy that. By excitement I mean never resting. I like to go to bed tired out; then I can sleep. I like to get

on my horse and gallop for miles, till he and I are fairly exhausted. I like to go after the hounds, and I do not care if I break my neck while the excitement lasts. It would not much matter, you see, if I did. I don't suppose any one would care.'

'Stop!' I cry, with a shudder, as Miss Allington's story in all its wretched vividness flashes before my eyes; 'you must not talk like that—indeed, *indeed* you must not. Lots of people would care; Miss Allington and I——'

I am standing before him with my dark eyes raised to his grey ones in horror, looking through him at his father's face, my thin, trembling fingers tightly clasped together.

He starts.

'What!' he cries, seizing my hands, and

scanning my face as if in it he could read his fate. 'You care!'

'Yes,' I say, dropping my eyes, in which he has mistaken terror for love. 'You know I should; you promised to be my friend. I have not so many that I can spare one.'

He drops my hands.

'"*Nothing*" ever comes to harm,' he says bitterly.

'Will you promise not to risk your life again?' I cry eagerly; 'it is cruel to me. If anything happened to you I should feel like a—a *murderess*.'

'Make your mind easy about that,' he says carelessly; 'the hunting season is over now, you know.'

With this economical allowance of comfort we enter the house.

'You doubtless encountered the Vicar,' says Miss MacGregor, meeting us in the hall. 'Sarah said he was in the garden.'

'No,' I explain, with a guilty blush. 'We have not seen him.'

As a welcome interruption, the Vicar, accompanied by Jack and Mabel, suddenly appears; and as both the children are talking at once, and Miss MacGregor is endeavouring to introduce her guest to his host, farther inquiries are dispensed with—for the present, at least.

The Rev. Donald MacGregor is a muscular Christian, though not so tall or bony as his sister. His head is getting unpleasantly bald, and at this season of the year troublesomely attractive to flies.

For many years he has been meekly subservient to petticoat government.

Whether or not, at some remote period, he had an opinion of his own, it is idle to speculate; as no one has heard him express one for many years, it is natural to conclude that he had not. Perhaps he found it wiser for the general peace to bow to superior judgment.

He has a curious habit of ending all his sentences with a few stray notes of no particular tune. This habit probably originated in a desire to elongate his somewhat brief remarks.

'Tea awaits us,' observes Miss MacGregor, with dignity. 'Will you, as usual, deposit your hat in the hall, Miss Fane?'

'Yes, thank you,' I say, taking it off as I speak, and making a frantic effort to hang it on a high peg that is half an inch beyond me.

'Allow me,' says Cyril, taking the hat from me and hanging it up.

Then we go into the bright old-fashioned dining-room, the windows of which look out on the garden, and the delicious perfume of the honeysuckle fills the room.

Jack and Mabel have already made an onslaught upon the strawberry jam, and are becoming rather sticky in the process.

'Brother,' says Miss MacGregor from behind the tea-urn, 'Captain Walters informs me that he too has discovered the great attraction which the study of vegetation presents to the enlightened mind.'

'Very true, indeed — delightful! yes, I'm sure, do de, hum, tol the rah!' murmurs the vicar.

Captain Walters buries his nose preci-

pitately in his tea-cup, and withdraws it as suddenly with a scalded tongue and watery eyes.

'You find this picturesque neighbourhood attractive?' asks Miss MacGregor, turning to Cyril.

'Yes, very; I have spent many happy weeks here,' he replies, having somewhat recovered from the painful effects of the hot tea.

'I think you said you were the guest of Major Brook at the present time?'

'Yes.'

'I have heard he has a very fine collection of orchids.'

'Very fine, indeed; he has given a fabulous price for some of the specimens. You should see them, Miss MacGregor; I think they would interest you.'

'Doubtless. Brother, we have one or two dried specimens of that wonderful plant; we must show them to Captain Walters.'

'Certainly, my dear; we must of course show them, toodle, oudle, ou.'

'When do you return to the vortex of frivolity?'

'I beg your pardon!' says Cyril, looking mystified.

'When do you return to the metropolis?'

'Oh, in about a week, I believe. Thanks, no more strawberry jam.'

'A little honey, perhaps?' suggests the Vicar smilingly.

'No, thank you.'

'May I give you some more tea?' asks Miss MacGregor.

'Or a little new milk?' murmurs the Vicar.

'Nothing more, thank you!'

'Then I shall now give myself the pleasure of exhibiting the results of our botanical researches,' says Miss MacGregor, rising; 'but first let me show you a few specimens of the Cypripedium Calceolus, which I have at present in water in this glass.'

Captain Walters minutely examines and duly praises the Cypripedium Calceolus.

'According to the Linnæan system of arrangement,' she continues, 'all plants are divided into twenty-four classes, the Cypripedium Calceolus is contained in class twenty.'

'I suppose you have not been able to come across all the twenty-four classes

yet?' asks Cyril anxiously, with a look of appeal to me for rescue.

'Everyone of them,' replies Miss MacGregor cheerfully. 'When I have shown you a few little paintings here, we will go to my study, and you shall indeed enjoy that sumptuous meal nature has generously provided for the hungry mind.'

She unlocks an old-fashioned mahogany work-table, and takes out a few cards, on which some flowers are painted.

'This, you see, represents the Butomus Umbellatus, known to unlearned minds as the flowering rush.'

'It is very beautifully painted,' exclaims Cryil, with genuine interest.

'Yes; Miss Fane interprets the designs of nature with precision.'

'Did *you* paint it?' he asks, brightening. 'How well you have done it!'

'Have I? I am very fond of flower-painting,' I say, smiling.

'If the painting meets with your approval, Miss Fane will not mind, I am sure, my presenting to you the duplicate copy, with which she has very considerately supplied me.'

'May I have it?' he asks eagerly, still looking at me. 'You will not mind? I should so like to have your painting.'

'Of course I do not mind,' I say.

'Come into the garden!' cries Jack, dragging at my hand. 'I want to go and see the white rabbit.'

We find the Vicar and Mabel in the hall, and all go together, leaving poor Cyril and his amiable hostess discussing the Potentilla Auserina in class twelve.

We have wandered aimlessly round and

round the flowers and vegetables, pausing with extraordinary interest over some diseased-looking turnips and unhealthy radishes; we have carried on a soft, murmuring, utterly vapid conversation, interspersed by sundry 'do, re, mes,' and 'toodle, oudle, ous,' with 'fal, la, la' as a variation, and half an hour has slowly dragged itself away, when the sound of horses' feet makes me look up, and at the same time Captain Walters and Miss MacGregor emerge from the ivy-covered porch.

Cyril has ordered his horse and is going.

'Good-bye!' he says, taking my hand; 'if I see Lady Trevor, I shall give her a very good account of the children and you.'

'Thank you! and my love to Miss Allington, please.'

'Of course. You will soon be in town now?'

'Yes, I hope so,' I answer brightly.

Then he says good-bye to the Vicar and his sister, and goes through the little green gate.

Very slowly he rides away, turning his head to look back at us from time to time. Suddenly he puts his horse into a gallop and disappears from our sight.

CHAPTER III.

'Jacta est alea.'

One by one the bright June days leave us, and I do not see Captain Walters again, so my question remains unanswered, and life at the Hall continues its uninterrupted monotony, only relieved by the visits of the Vicar and his sister.

And now July has come, and we are panting and gasping for air, which is just the one thing we cannot find.

The dogs are lying with their tongues out, as if they had just been washed and were hanging out to dry.

Thomas, the under-groom, is sustaining his feeble energies with light refreshment out of a pewter pot, and Sims, the gardener, is sitting under a tree in his wheelbarrow, fanning himself with a rhubarb leaf. Yes, we are all undeniably insufferably hot.

It is twelve o'clock, and the children's lessons are once more at an end. We have strolled into the garden in quest of the much-desired shade and air, and, like the gardener, ensconced ourselves under a big oak-tree.

Mabel is making a daisy-chain, and Jack lying on the grass with his fair head resting on my knee.

'Are you not well, Jack?' I ask anxiously, with a growing fear at my heart as I look at his little tired face. 'You are so quiet, darling.'

'I am always quiet and tired,' he answers, drawing my hand over his eyes to keep off the glare of the sun.

He ought to go away, I tell myself; he is fading and drooping here. Why cannot he go to the sea for the holidays?

Then I fall to wondering who could take him. Lady Trevor and Florence are too full of gaiety to spare time to do so.

There is only one way: I must give up going to Miss Allington's, and take the children away myself if Lady Trevor will consent to it.

A tear trickles down my nose. It would have been so sweet to take a glimpse into the old life. I have been looking forward to it for so long. I have pictured the delights of even the tail-end of another London season: the opera, the receptions,

the balls — the possibility of seeing Jeffery. Even as Lady Mabel's lover, I long to see him.

And then I once more look at Jack.

Why is he so pale, with those dark circles round his eyes?

'Jack!' I cry, catching him in my arms and smothering his face with kisses, 'you are *not* ill! You will soon be all right again, darling! Would you like to go to the sea, Jack, with Mabel and me? We should be so happy, and you would not be tired then; you——'

And then, as I see his wondering eyes fixed on my face, I break out into passionate weeping, and clasp my boy closer to my heart, for I know he is slowly gliding away, and that all my care, and prayers, and love, cannot delay him from taking

that journey on which we must all some day embark.

'Don't cry,' says Jack soothingly, stroking my face. 'I ain't ill—only *tired*.'

A shadow falls upon the grass. I dry my eyes hastily, for I see the condescending Bagstock making steadily for me.

'Doctor Wilson wants to see you, Miss Fane.'

I rise hastily and endeavour to compose my gloomy countenance into the decent semblance of a smile, a laudable attempt at deception which ultimately results in signal failure.

'I will come,' I say. 'Send nurse to the children.'

And then I follow Bagstock to the library.

Doctor Wilson is standing with his back

to the empty grate, minutely examining the polish on his boots; he raises his head as I enter.

'Good morning, Miss Fane; I thought, as I was passing, I would just take a peep at you and the children—eh?'

'Thank you,' I say. 'I was wishing to see you.'

'Nothing wrong, I hope,' he says quickly, examining my recently woeful countenance. 'You have not been crying, eh?'

'No—yes—that is,' I falter, 'I am rather unhappy about Jack. I want you to see him; he is always tired, and I am sure he ought to go away.'

The doctor puts on an important professional frown.

'You had better let me see him.'

With tired, lagging steps, through the flashing sunlight, through the noonday glare, my boy comes to me.

I lift him on my knee, and his head falls upon my shoulder.

Dr. Wilson looks at him, and I can see an unusual anxiety in his face.

'No sore throat, eh?'

'No,' says Jack, 'only tired!'

'No flush, pulse quiet, eh? Oh, I think there is not much the matter. You can run away and play, my little man.'

Run away and play! Slowly he slips off my knee.

'You will come soon?' he says, with beseeching eyes raised to mine.

And I nod 'Yes.'

'You thought it might be—you were afraid of *fever!*' I cry, with a sickening

fear at my heart; 'he would never live through *that*.'

'Make your mind easy,' returns the doctor; 'there is no appearance of it, so far. I confess I was a little suspicious; you see, we have several cases of fever in the village.'

Like lead his words fall upon my heart. So near! so near!

'The children must go away at once,' I cry, clasping my hands. 'Oh, Dr. Wilson, tell me what I am to do!'

'I should advise you to write to Lady Trevor, and tell her exactly how things are. There is plenty of time. I do not see any cause for anxiety at present. If you like I will look in again to-morrow?'

'Yes,' I say eagerly; 'pray do!'

'By-the-bye, I was nearly forgetting

one of the objects of my call,' suddenly exclaims the doctor, replacing his hat on the table and fumbling in his pocket. 'The postman left this letter at my house in mistake this morning.'

I tear it hastily open. It is from Lady Trevor.

'They are going abroad next week,' I cry; 'she says I am to remain here during the holidays with the children. Dr. Wilson, something must be done directly. I must take them away.'

'You had better write to Lady Trevor to-day,' says the doctor calmly; 'she will no doubt send you her instructions—eh?'

So he goes, and I still stand there, dazed and miserable, with the open letter in my hand.

Very slowly the bright July days seem

to leave us. I am almost too anxious to eat, drink, or sleep. We do no lessons now; almost all day Jack lies on my knee listening to the oft-repeated stories, or making me sing to him in the fading light.

Mabel is well, and as merry as ever. She spends most of her time with the nurse, finding her no doubt by far the more cheerful companion; so my boy and I are alone.

With feverish restlessness I count the hours that must elapse before I receive Lady Trevor's reply and permission to take the children away beyond the reach of the dreaded malady, which is daily, hourly stretching its arms wider and wider over the ill-fated village.

I do not let Mabel or Jack go beyond

the grounds, and I have issued stringent orders that the servants are to hold no communication whatever with the village.

At last the expected letter comes.

I tear it open with trembling haste. To-morrow—even to-day perhaps—we can start.

The letter is from Florence.

'Dear Miss Fane,

'Your letter has upset poor mamma terribly, and brought on one of her nervous attacks. She desires me to write and say that you must not take the children away on any account. If they have taken the infection, as she fears must be the case from your account of Jack, it would be madness to attempt it; and if

not, they are by this time tolerably safe not to do so.

'After all, it is only one of the childish complaints, and I dare say a good thing over. Probably they will have the fever mildly, and I am sure you will nurse them through it with every care and attention.

'Dr. Wilson will be always near for you to call in. It is really altogether very tiresome, happening just now, when we want to go abroad. I am afraid Lord Selwin will start without us now, but perhaps if you write and tell mamma that the children are all right, I shall still be able to persuade her to start.

'On no account send for us home unless the children are in great danger. You know mamma's horror of infection, and no

one would come near us for weeks afterwards.

'Mamma says you are to write daily, and should the children take the fever, Dr. Wilson is to write also.

'We shall remain here, anyway, for a week longer now.

'Please take all needful precautions against infection.

'Yours truly,

'FLORENCE TREVOR.'

I throw the letter on the floor with a bitter cry of anger and disgust.

'Heartless, selfish, unnatural!' I say, my eyes flashing; 'they would not care if we were all dead, as long as they could go abroad and enjoy themselves!'

Then I sit down and write a stiff little

note to Miss Trevor, merely saying that Lady Trevor's orders shall be obeyed, that the children at present show no sign of fever, and that I have for some days past consulted Dr. Wilson, and taken all needful precautions against infection.

Then, with trembling lips and abated breath, I *wait.*

CHAPTER IV.

'Not so; but it hath been the longest night
That e'er I watched, and the most heaviest.'
Two Gentlemen of Verona.

'YES; I will write to her ladyship and tell her I see the rallying powers are very feeble.'

'They must come,' I say dully, raising my white face to the doctor's. 'She is dying.'

'You are overwrought, Miss Fane, and nervous. These long days and nights of nursing have knocked you up—eh?'

'She is dying,' I repeat doggedly. 'I

know it; they must come. I wanted you to send for them before.'

Then Dr. Wilson goes.

As I feared, the fatal fever has slowly but surely reached us. First Mabel sickened and fell. The burning head, feverish red lips, and bright eyes told their own tale.

With a cruel wrench I gave up my boy to the care of the nurse, and devoted myself day and night to the poor delirious little invalid. But now Jack and I are separated no longer, for he too is stricken down with the fever.

Daily bulletins have gone to Lady Trevor, and every reply has contained strict orders to disinfect my letters carefully before sending them.

Up to the present time Dr. Wilson has

pronounced his patients' progress favourable, but to-day I can see a change in the little pinched face of Mabel.

The crisis is over, and she has opened her eyes once more on life; but the little feet are tottering very feebly on that regained road—so feebly that ere many steps are taken the journey may end.

For hours I have hung over the bed holding her hand in mine, but all the restoratives we are able to give seem useless. I can see she is slowly sinking.

'Miss Fane,' says Dr. Wilson, coming into the room—he has not left the house for more than two hours at a time all day you must positively go and rest. You will be ill.'

'I will not leave her,' I say, raising my

dull eyes to his face. 'Have you telegraphed to Lady Trevor?'

'Yes.'

'How soon can they be here?'

'Not before eleven o'clock to-morrow.'

'Then they will be too late!'

He does not answer, but I know he thinks so too.

Slowly the daylight fades, and still he and I remain beside the two small beds. Nurse, worn out with fatigue, has gone away to rest, so we watch alone.

Mabel's faint breathing grows less and less. Dr. Wilson makes me drink a glass of wine, and looks anxiously into my face; but I do not heed him: my whole life seems absorbed in those two little frail beings, whose feet are even now wet with the spray of the silver river—the river of death!

About four o'clock there is a feeble fluttering sigh, and looking at Mabel, we know that one bark has put out to sea.

Dr. Wilson gently disengages my cold hand from hers, and leads me to Jack's bedside. So once more we take up our vigil.

'Do you mind being alone for a short time?' he asks. 'I think I must go and make some arrangement.'

'No,' I answer slowly, shaking my head. 'I don't mind anything.'

So he leaves me.

I do not know how long he has been gone, but nurse and Mrs. Prodgers have been into the room and left it again.

I have never taken my eyes off my darling for more than a minute since I

first took up my station beside him. In spite of the darkened windows, the daylight is peeping into the room. Surely now they will soon be here?

Once I fancy I see the long lashes tremble, and I lean over the bed and say:

'Jack!'

Very slowly he opens his eyes. I see he knows me, for he smiles. I try to make him drink some wine, for the fever has passed away and only prostration remains. He drinks a little, and a wild hope fills my heart.

'Sing to me,' he whispers.

'I can't, Jack,' I say, with a tearless sob.

He looks disappointed.

'Yes, darling, I will!' I cry, with a

hollow attempt; but the sound will not come.

I try again, and fail. Then he says:

'No, you can't sing, can you? Nurse me instead.'

I twine my arms about my pretty little lad. Oh! he is slipping so fast—so fast from my feeble mortal grasp! Then Dr. Wilson comes into the room. Very quietly, still in the same position, time passes.

'You will not leave me?' says Jack, after a long pause.

'No, never! Never any more, darling!' I cry, clasping him closer.

* * * * *

'Come away,' says Dr. Wilson, taking my hand. 'You can do no good now: it is all over.'

'It is not!' I cry wildly. 'He is not dead! You do not know! You do not understand! He is here in my arms! Jack, Jack! look at me!'

'Hush!' says Dr. Wilson firmly. 'Do as I bid you.'

But I only clasp my dead boy closer in my arms.

'Hark!' I say; 'I can hear wheels. They have come, and they are too late.'

'I must go and prepare them,' he says, leaving the room.

'He is not dead! He is not dead!' I repeat over and over to myself.

And then my listening ear catches the sound of steps coming down the passage. Perhaps it is Sir John! Poor Sir John, he may not know his boy is dead! I reluctantly disengage my arms from around

him, and lay him gently on the bed. Then I rush madly from the room and down the passage.

'You are too late—too late!' I cry; and then I see it is not Sir John, but Captain Walters.

I do not ask him how he came there, it does not occur to me as being strange that he should be there; but when he catches me in his strong arms, something seems to quiet me.

'He is dead!' I say, in a dull monotone; 'and Mabel is dead! Why don't they come?'

'They will be here soon,' he answers, his white face full of a nameless fear. 'You must come and rest, dear; indeed you must.'

'Hark!' I cry suddenly, raising my

head and breaking from him; 'Jack is calling me—I must go.'

Then something seems to snap in my head, and, with a loud wild cry, I throw up my arms and fall senseless on the floor.

CHAPTER V.

'Her face was near; and as we kiss the child
That does the task assign'd, he kissed her face.'
TENNYSON.

AFTER a fierce struggle between life and death—a struggle that has lasted many days—I open my eyes on life once more.

I am lying in a darkened room, about which people move softly. I wonder vaguely how long I have been ill, and what has been the matter with me. And then I try to raise myself on my elbow, and find I am too weak to move at all.

Then I look up, and see some one bending over me—some one like Miss Allington.

'I have been ill, have not I?' I ask, in such a small weak voice that she has to bend very low to hear it.

'Yes, dear; very ill.'

'What has been the matter with me?'

'Fever.'

'And the children—who has been taking care of them?'

She turns away her face as she answers:

'They are quite safe and happy. Now you must be very quiet, and not talk any more, or you will be tired.'

I *am* tired—too tired to ask any more questions—but, as I gain strength, recollection comes back to me.

'Miss Allington,' I say one day, after my eyes have been following her as she

moves softly about the room, 'I want to talk to-day. I feel quite strong now.'

She smiles.

'Not very, I think,' taking my hand in hers; 'but you may talk a little, if you like.'

'How thin it is,' I say pityingly, looking at my white fingers; 'and so long. I did not know my hands were so long.'

'They will soon lose all that,' says Miss Allington cheerfully. 'We shall see them quite bonny again before long.'

'And my face? do I look very much like a scarecrow altogether?'

'No, certainly not,' laughing. 'You are very much more like a white lily.'

'Why did you come to nurse me?' I ask, after a pause.

'Because I thought you would be better

taken care of, for one reason, and I had strict orders from my captain as well.'

'Your captain?'

'Yes,' she answers, smiling. 'Cyril, you know.'

There is a long pause after this. Miss Allington is holding my hand, and I am thinking how good Cyril is.

'What made him come here *that day?*' I ask, with a shudder.

'He heard by the merest chance that there was fever here, and that you were alone, so he came at once to see if he could be of any use.'

'You need not mind mentioning the children,' I say sadly. 'I remember all about it now. I have been thinking about it all for hours since I have been myself. They are dead!'

She does not answer.

'I suppose they buried them very quickly?'

'Yes.'

'Did any of the Trevors come?'

'Only Sir John and Lady Trevor.'

'Have they gone again?'

'Yes; they went the day after the funeral.'

One day, when I have been propped up in bed, and am beginning slowly to gain strength, Miss Allington comes into my room with a splendid bouquet of flowers in her hand.

'Some more flowers?' I cry, stretching ont my white, trembling hands towards them. 'Oh, how lovely they are!'

'They are from Cyril,' she says, smiling. 'He is downstairs, and very anxious to know how you are.'

'How good of him to bring them!' I say gratefully. 'Did he send me all the lovely flowers that have been in my room every day since I have been getting better?'

'He brought them every day himself.'

'Then he has been staying down here?'

'Yes. Since you have been ill he has been at the King's Arms at Bidsley, and ridden over every day to ask after you. We have all been very anxious about you, dear.'

'It is all too much,' I say, beginning to cry. 'You are both too good to me.'

'Hush! hush!' she says soothingly. 'You will make Cyril wretched if you cry about his present and throw yourself back for days. You have no strength to waste.'

'I want to thank him,' I sob piteously.

'I was so unkind to him once, and he has been all goodness to me.'

'The best way to thank him is to get well, and then we will take you into the other room, and he shall come and have tea with us, and see you look like yourself again.'

'Yes,' I assent; 'you will tell him so, and thank him?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think,' I ask, my pale face flushing, 'he would like it better if I tried to write "Thank you" on a piece of paper? He would know then I was getting strong.'

'I am sure he would like it.'

'Then I will try.'

She gives me a pencil, and I scrawl the words in an unsteady faint hand.

'Do you think he can read it?' I ask anxiously.

'Oh yes, quite well.'

Then I sink back upon my pillows, tired even with this small exertion, and look at the lovely bouquet lying on my bed.

I wonder what Jeffery is doing, and if he is still with Lady Mabel. Perhaps they will be married this autumn, and he will bring his bride down to Walsingham Castle, only two miles from here. Ah! well; it will not matter much to me now.

My work here is over. Long before then I shall be many miles away. Somewhere! where?

Now I have once taken the turn I make rapid strides towards convalescence, and before many days are over I am leaning on

Miss Allington's arm, on my way to the next room.

'How lean and lantern-jawed I look,' I observe, pausing to contemplate my pale visage in the mirror. 'My eyes look as big as saucers; as to my dress, it is more like a sack than anything else. Florence Trevor used to call me abominably thin before, I wonder what she would call me now?

'Are you sure seeing Cyril will not be too much for you, Ruth?'

'Quite sure. I want to see him,' I answer, and then once more laying my hand on her arm we go.

He is standing with his back to us, gazing out of the window at the garden beneath; when he turns to greet me I see his face is very pale.

He comes forward quickly, and putting his arm round me just as he would round a tired child, leads me to the sofa.

Then in the fulness of my heart I raise my lips to his.

'I want to thank you,' I say brokenly; 'for bringing *her* to me, and—and everything.'

Very reverently he bows his head, and his lips meet mine. There is no passion, no wild gleam of hope in that first kiss. He knows I am deeply, inexpressibly grateful to him, and it is the strongest way of showing him my gratitude. As it is given, it is received; and yet when his lips touch mine ever so lightly, I feel the arm supporting me tremble.

'I am so thankful you are better,' he says, quite simply. 'You will soon be

like — you will soon be well again now.'

'You were going to say like myself again,' I say, smiling; 'but you think that will take some time, now you see what a scarecrow I am.'

'I confess you are not looking very strong yet.'

'Nonsense, Cyril,' exclaims Miss Allington. 'She is wonderfully better; you know I warned you she was a good deal changed, before you saw her — people always look worse when they begin to get better.'

'Yes,' acquiesces Cyril meekly.

'Some more flowers!' I say, looking at the table, on which a lovely bouquet stands. 'How did you know I was so fond of them?'

'You forget, or perhaps you do *not* forget our little entertainment at the Vicarage?' he answers. 'I found it out then; no one who did not love flowers, could paint them as you do.'

'Oh, poor Miss MacGregor!' I say sadly; 'how she bored you that day; but you made a very favourable impression: she was full of your praises when you had gone. Do you remember how well the children were that day?' I go on, with a sob; 'skipping about, and singing, and laughing, and now they are——'

'I must positively forbid this sort of thing,' interrupts Miss Allington. 'I shall not allow Cyril to bring you any more flowers; they always upset you.'

'No—no, they don't,' I sob. 'I love them; but I can't help thinking of the

children; if I had only kept up until they were buried, if I could only have put some flowers in my boy's hand, I think I should have felt less miserable. Did they put any flowers in the coffins, Miss Allington?'

'Ruth,' she says, very gently; 'I am going to tell you something. I am afraid it will make you cry more, but I think the thought of it afterwards will be a comfort to you. Jack and Mabel had some of your own flowers in their hands when they were buried.'

'What do you mean?' I ask, raising my tear-stained face with a great wonder in it.

'I will tell you. When Sir John was told you had taken the fever, he said your friends were to be sent for at once. Cyril, who, you know, was there, undertook to

see about it, and did about the most sensible thing he could do—he came straight to me. While I was making preparations to come back with him, Cyril went and bought some white camellias; and then he told me he had been thinking it would be a comfort to you to know that the flowers that had been in your hand had been put in the little coffins.'

'And you thought of it? You did it?' I cry, stretching out my arms to Cyril, and tottering feebly across the room to him. 'When I was lying there with no thought of anything, you did just what I should have wished. Why are you so good to me?'

He catches me in his arms to save me from falling.

'I am not the least bit good, and you

are extremely naughty, so I think you had better have some tea, don't you ?'

But I only lay my face on his shoulder and cry. I think it does me good, that blinding storm of tears; I feel calmer after it, and lie on the sofa listening to my companions' voices as they talk of everything they can think of, to divert my mind from all I have lately gone through : London, the theatres, the operas, the last new beauty, Lady Chalmers's fancy ball, and many others. Sometimes they mention a name that was familiar to me in the days gone by—a name which brings with it a flood of recollections. Then, in the fading light, Cyril goes, promising to come again to-morrow, and Miss Allington and I are once more alone.

CHAPTER VI.

'Catch not my breath, O clamorous heart!
Let not my tongue be a thrall to my eye;
For I must tell her before we part—
I must tell her or die!'

Maud.

So it comes about that one bright August day, Cyril and I find ourselves in the garden, under the shade of a big beech tree, lazily listening to the hum of the bees, and the cawing of the rooks, and the murmur that reaches us from time to time of the hay-makers talking in the field over yonder.

Miss Allington has gone to the Vicarage to call upon my old friend Miss Mac-

Gregor, so Cyril and I entertain each other in her absence.

Very peaceful and quiet is all around us: not a breath of air comes to us, not a leaf upon the mighty tree over our heads stirs. Summer in all her wonderful golden glory is still among us; she will not die a lingering tearful death, this last youngest Summer of ours: her sunny robe will not fade, or her eye grow dim; but one fair evening, perhaps, she will give us her good-bye kiss, and when we awake, behold! she will be gone, and her gentle sister Autumn will be reigning in her stead; the crystal wand will have passed over the heads of the flowers and laid them low, and her sigh will echo from tree to tree, and we shall look in vain for our golden queen who has passed away from us for evermore!

Cyril's voice rouses me.

'Where have your thoughts taken you?' he asks, smiling; 'you seemed very far away.'

'I was wondering how long the summer would last; it is all very beautiful now.'

''Till you are quite strong again, I hope.'

'Oh! I am that now; see, my hands are quite *fat*.'

He laughs.

'If Selwin were here, he would say "*awfully*."'

'I mean as fat as they used to be; you forget what they were like before I was ill.'

'Forget!' he says quickly; then, looking away: 'Hark at that thrush over there; he seems to be practising up for a concert. Do you hear the wild, sweet, tuneless notes? Poor fellow, I wonder when the winter

comes if he will realize how blithe his summer song was?'

'When the winter comes!' I repeat. 'Cyril, I want to talk to you of the future—my winter, you know,' smiling drearily.

He rises hastily and arranges the cushions more comfortably in my basket chair; then, instead of resuming the chair which he has vacated, he throws himself on the grass at my feet and tilts his hat over his eyes.

'Is there any need to trouble about that yet?' he asks.

'Yes; every need—do you know, it is a whole fortnight since I first came down stairs.'

'Yes; exactly two weeks to-day,' smiling.

'Well, I am quite able to travel now,

and I think I have no right to trespass on Sir John's hospitality, or Mrs Allington's kindness either.'

'Where do you propose going? if it is not a rude question.'

'I shall go to my old nurse, until I can hear of another situation.'

'Where does she live?'

'In a little cottage of her own at Notley, the place where I used to live, you know.'

'Amongst all your former friends is there no one with whom you would care to stay?' he asks.

'No one has asked me,' I answer. 'I don't think many of them remember my existence—it is the way of the world.'

'Your old nurse will be glad to see you?'

'Oh yes!' I cry, the tears coming into my eyes; 'she is not a fair-weather friend;

she would be always the same, if I became an empress or a crossing sweeper.'

There is silence between us once more. This time I break it.

'If Miss Allington approves, I thought I would ask nursie to come here and fetch me; I do not feel equal to travelling quite alone yet.'

'Promise me something,' says Cyril, fixing his kind grey eyes on my face; 'it is not a very hard thing, and I am sure you would do it without a promise; but still, it would make me happier to have your word.'

'What is it?'

'That you will consult Miss Allington about your future, and be guided by her advice.'

'Yes, of course, I will promise that.'

'Even if her wishes involve a certain amount of sacrifice on your part?'

'Cyril,' I say, reproachfully, 'how can you doubt it? when she has done so much for me. I would do anything for her, the harder the better, that I might in some faint degree show her my gratitude.'

'Thank you, dear,' he says simply.

For the first time a faint breeze rustles the leaves over our heads. The bee that was humming round the long white-throated foxglove has flown away. The voices of the hay-makers are silent, and the blithe thrush has finished his tuneless song and disappeared.

'I wonder if you will mind the trouble of writing to me sometimes,' says Cyril, huskily; 'it would give me a great deal of pleasure to hear from you.'

Then the iron hand he has kept over himself relaxes its hold, and with a great cry, he buries his face in his hands.

'O darling, you don't know what the past weeks have been to me, or you would say yes; it is not much to ask, and it would be everything to me to know that you were well and happy, and that when I was miles and miles away, you were sometimes thinking of me. It would be very merciful and very kind. Do you know when I lie awake at night, hour after hour I hear those words of yours ringing in my ears, "I hate you," they blot out all else, and haunt me till I sometimes think I shall go mad!'

'I did not mean it!' I cry, stretching out my hand to him; 'I scarcely knew what I said. Can nothing make you for-

get it? Can nothing blot it out, as though it had never been?'

'Yes,' he answers, in a low voice, 'but I dare not hope, I dare not think of that. If you will let me be your friend——'

'More than my friend!' I cry, in my deep remorse and bitter self-reproach.

I forget what my words may imply; what I see the next moment, looking at him, they have implied. His face is white and rigid, like that of a man awaiting his sentence of life or death. Eager beyond all expression, incredulous, yet desperately hopeful.

'Oh, Cyril, Cyril!' I cry, 'don't look like that; I did not mean what you fancied. I only meant I—I——'

He has risen to his feet, and is standing before me.

'You only meant that you did not hate me!' he says, all the hope dying out of his face, and the old despairing look once more coming into it. 'I might have known.'

'I love you as a brother, if you will let me be your sister,' pleadingly raising my eyes to his.

He staggers back a step or two and leans against the trunk of the tree, with his eyes closed.

'Ask me something less hard!' he says, hoarsely. 'I cannot do it even for you.'

'Then we will be friends, since we can be nothing more,' I say, with a miserable dull aching at my heart.

'I think now you are better, I must go away,' he says, gently. 'I could not do it while you were ill, but now—now it will be best.'

And looking at him in the fading sunlight, I, too, know it will be best. And yet he has been such a good thing in my life—such a ray of brightness flashing across the gloom—just as one looks for the first glimpse of sunlight on a dull sky; so, without knowing it, without realizing it, I too have looked for Cyril Walters. Just as one feels disappointment and regret when the welcomed ray fades from our view, I feel now what a blank it will be without him. And yet in common justice to him I cannot say 'stay,' for still deep down in my heart I fancy there lives that old love still—call it youthful romance, if you like—but there it is all the same.

'Well, Ruth!' cries Miss Allington, suddenly appearing round a turn in the path. 'I have something for you. Thomas

has just come back from Bidsley with two letters, and a small parcel for you—which came by the second post.'

Then seeing Cyril's face, she stops, and in a moment comprehends the true state of affairs.

'You want a walk, Cyril,' she says, kindly. 'I will look after this child now. We shall expect you back to tea at seven. I will walk as far as the avenue gate with you,' slipping her hand through his arm.

So I sit there and watch them as they slowly disappear from sight, and perhaps at that moment I clearly realise, for the first time, what it will be to stand once more alone. Helplessly, friendlessly, *alone!*

'Poor Cyril!' says the gentle voice that I have learned to love so dearly, 'he will

be quite happy when he comes back. I am sorry I left you, my dear; I hope this has not upset you much.'

O the infinite patience and tenderness of this woman!

'I wonder you don't both hate me,' I say feebly, as the tears race each other down my pale cheeks.

For answer, she kisses me; and picking up my unopened correspondence leads me gently back to the house.

I can see, as the hands of the clock point to seven, Miss Allington's eyes constantly seek it; but almost before it has finished striking, Cyril comes in.

The walk has had its effect on him: the bitterness and despair have gone out of his face, though it is still very pale; but as the grey eyes meet mine with a smile in

them, I know the battle has been once more fought and won, and that in his soul, at least, there is peace.

Tea is over, and we have all taken our respective places for the evening. Miss Allington sits by the table knitting, Cyril, in the arm-chair, reading the newspaper, and I on a small stool by the French window, with my eyes fixed on the distant hills that in a few short weeks may be to me only things of the past—old familiar faces but dimly recollected.

'I had a letter to-day from MacHarness,' says Cyril laying down the paper and addressing Miss Allington, 'inviting me to his place up in the north for some shooting. He wants me to go on the tenth, if I can, and take charge of some young lady as far as Edinburgh, when her brother, or

father, or somebody meets her; and I believe we all go on together.'

'You will go, of course,' returns Miss Allington. 'I am so glad: the change and a little gaiety is what you want.'

'Yes, I suppose I shall go,' he acquiesces listlessly; 'that is, if you are settled somewhere, and don't want me.'

Mechanically I have been listening to him; his last words remind me of my unopened letters.

Slowly I take them from my pocket and open the one bearing Lady Trevor's handwriting.

'Dear Miss Fane,

'From a letter which I received to-day from Miss Allington, I conclude you are now approaching convalescence; I

am extremely glad to hear this, as I have been wishing to write and tell you that both Sir John and myself feel that during the time our dear children were ill your conduct was everything that could be desired. Doctor Wilson also assures us of the fact, and adds that they both received every care and attention.

'Under these circumstances we are anxious to do anything we can to enable you to procure another situation, and we think as you made yourself useful and agreeable to Miss Gay, that a permanent engagement with her would be in every way satisfactory as she is now seeking for a companion.

'I may add, that as your duties will of course be considerably lighter than they were whilst in our employment the salary

will be proportionately less. I believe Miss Gay intends to give thirty pounds a year.

'My nerves are still in a terribly shattered state, owing principally to our late bereavement. I am sure that the attention which Miss Allington has kindly bestowed upon you (although it appears to me, under the circumstances, rather unusual) will meet with a proper and suitable acknowledgment.

'Believe me,

'Truly yours,

'F. M. R. Trevor.'

I have read it through to the end.

It does not surprise me, but it sets every nerve in my body twitching and writhing. I did not think, after all these months of

servitude she had the power to arouse any feeling but contempt in my heart.

I open the second letter. It is from Florence.

'Dear Miss Fane,

'Miss Allington says you are nearly all right again. I am so awfully glad to hear it. Mamma is, I know, writing to secure you for auntie. You will have a lively time of it then. Poor dear old soul! I hope you will be able to keep her at home. She gets quite too awfully shocking every year.

'You were a good girl to nurse the poor children so kindly and well. Papa was awfully cut up about it altogether, though he does not often speak about it. He seems to think mamma or I ought to have gone

down to help you nurse them; but you know I really am no use in the nursing line, and a perfect coward if there is any infection; and then Lord Selwin was in town, and I did not care to leave.

'We are going abroad directly. Mamma's nerves are, she says, so terribly shattered that she must have change of air and scene.

'Did I tell you Lord Selwin was going with us? He says I look so awfully well in black, I ought always to wear it. You see he has not altered much since you saw him.

'I must say good-bye now. I shall probably see you at auntie's.

'Yours truly,

'FLORENCE TREVOR.'

I have read this letter also and folded it

up again. I had almost forgotten the little box with Sir John's seal upon it. Poor Sir John! he was always kind to me. He would have been kinder if he had been allowed. And he really loved his children. I wonder what he has to say.

'My Dear Miss Fane,

'Will you accept the accompanying miniatures from me, that they may sometimes remind you of the deep debt of gratitude which I shall always feel, and which I am so utterly powerless ever to repay.

'As a reminder of our little ones I know how unnecessary they are after the tender care and unspeakable devotion you showed towards them, almost at the cost of your own life.

'I think we must all have appeared very heartless towards you, but I could not force my wife or daughter into danger which they feared so much, and I feel therefore the more deeply grateful to Miss Allington for taking our neglected duty on her shoulders.

'Trusting that you are now feeling stronger, and that you will look upon the Hall as your home as long as ever you find it agreeable to do so,

'Believe me now and always,

'Your *friend*,

'JOHN TREVOR.'

There before me in a morocco case lies a dead gold locket, with the words 'In Memoriam' engraved upon the outside. With trembling hands, and eyes blinded with

tears, I open it, and see the two little faces that a few short weeks ago made up the sum total of my daily life—the faces that are now white, rigid, motionless in death—looking out at me in all their childish happiness and glee.

And as I gaze all the bitterness goes out of my soul. I think the recollection of Lady Trevor and her daughter goes also, and I thank God that even for a few short months I was able to make those little lives happier and better for my presence.

'I have had a very kind letter from Sir John,' I say, putting it and the locket beside Miss Allington. 'I should like you to read it.'

And then, with a great spring of gratitude swelling up in my heart, the best

way of thanking him comes to me, and I go to the empty fireplace, strike a match, and burn to ashes his wife's letter.

Cyril watches me in silence; then I raise my eyes to his and say:

'It is from Lady Trevor. I thought I would rather burn it, for Sir John's sake.'

And I know he understands.

But though Sir John's kind words bidding me stay are looking me full in the face, I cannot stifle the burning desire that has come over me to go away, and there is nothing to wait for now. To-morrow, even, I can go to nurse, and after that, in about a week's time, I shall be able to take up my abode with Miss Gay.

Oh! the dreariness of the life that spreads out before me; the unevenness of the bargain: youth, health, enjoyment—

all that makes life worth living for—bartered away for thirty pounds a year!

'Miss Allington,' I say, resting my hand on the table, and watching two bright tears slowly rising in her eyes, 'Sir John is very kind in asking me to remain here, but don't you see I must—I would *rather* go away at once; and I want to tell you Lady Trevor has kindly interested herself for me, and I am to go to Miss Gay as soon as I am strong enough.'

'Miss Gay!' cries Cyril, springing up. 'May I ask if that suggestion, delicately put, of course,' ironically, 'was what Lady Trevor's letter contained?'

'Yes,' I answer, smiling in spite of myself; 'it was very kind of her to think of me at all; there was no reason why she should, you know.'

'Oh, not the least!' says Cyril, still ironical. 'What a cheerful life it would be for you—shouting your lungs out to a stone deaf old woman, taking the poodle (I conclude she has a poodle) out at the end of a string, and making her caps for variation.'

'What nonsense you are talking!' says Miss Allington. 'You do not mean seriously that Lady Trevor ever entertained such an idea?'

I look at her in suprise.

'Why not, Miss Allington? I shall be very thankful to go: it will not be hard work—I do not think I am strong enough to be a governess again at present.'

'Ruth,' she says, and I hear there is an unwonted eagerness in her voice, 'will

you do something to please me—a great favour, dear?'

'Oh anything—anything!' I cry, throwing my arms round her, and laying my tired head on her knee. 'I would go to the world's end to serve you—I would die for you; you know that nothing would be too hard to do for you.'

She rests her hand lightly on my head as she says:

'Then stay with me altogether.'

'Do you really mean that I may?' I ask, raising my head, and looking incredulously into her face. 'You cannot mean anything so good, really! Oh! how hard I will work for you—I can make some of your dresses, indeed I can, and do many things that I did for Florence Trevor. Let me be your maid, and wait

upon you. Oh! how happy that would make me.'

'My dear child,' says Miss Allington quietly, 'what do you think I am made of, to propose such a thing? There is only one capacity which you could fill if you came to me, the capacity of my dearly loved adopted daughter.'

There is a long silence. I can hear Cyril breathing quickly and nervously. The hand resting on my head trembles—and I? I am once more standing on the threshold of the old sweet life, full of youth and hope and happiness, standing in the cold and darkness without, and peeping cautiously, timidly in. May I enter? Must I take all, and give nothing in return? Must I tread my pride under my feet for evermore?

'Will you sacrifice your pride for my sake?' pleads the gentle voice; and with a great cry of love and thankfulness I lay my head on her breast, and she knows the sacrifice she has asked is made freely, fully, and my promise to Cyril fulfilled.

I think we are all very happy. Miss Allington and Cyril are full of plans for our journey to the Isle of Wight, which they decide is to be made on the day after to-morrow, and I sit looking dreamily at them, wondering if it can all be true, or if I shall wake up and find myself once more alone in the wide world.

CHAPTER VII.

'If I were loved as I desire to be,
What is there in the great sphere of the earth,
And range of evil between death and birth,
That I should fear, if I were loved by thee?'

Ryde at last! What a long, tiring journey it has been. Hot, dusty, parched, we stagger off the boat and on to dry land once more. Then to the tram, which, crammed with people, hot, dusty, parched like ourselves, glides slowly on, and we are stopping again, this time to accomplish the last stage of our journey in Miss Allington's landau, which is waiting to convey us *home*.

How refreshing that word sounds! What a comforting restful feeling it brings to our minds.

Cyril has helped us into the carriage, and is hunting for Miss Allington's unfortunate maid, Turner.

Poor Turner! she resembles the man in the song who 'never was meant for the sea;' to judge from the ghastly hue of her visage as she emerges from behind the heap of boxes.

'Everything has arrived safely,' says Cyril. 'Turner had better be driven up with the luggage; the under-groom is here with the cart.'

'By all means,' assents Miss Allington. 'Now home.'

It is not a long drive, but oh! such a lovely one. I think, as I lean back and

drink in the intense beauty and freshness of all around me, I feel as if the last year of my life must have been a hideous distorted dream.

It seems so natural to luxuriate in the good things of this life; and yet, when I always had them, I never appreciated them as I do now. I took them as a matter of course, and never contemplated what it would be to do without them.

'You are very quiet, Ruth,' says Miss Allington; 'I hope you are not very tired?'

'Not very,' I answer, smiling; 'I am too happy to talk, I think.'

The carriage has stopped before a pretty old-fashioned house covered with roses in full bloom. The scent of the sweet pink blossoms is wafted to us on the wings

of the still summer air. Such roses (innocent of all cultivation, save a little nailing up by a primitive rustic) as I have not seen since the time I left my old home.

Suddenly the door flies open; and with a cry of surprise and joy I tumble out of the carriage and into the kind old arms stretched out to receive me.

'Oh, nursie—nursie!' I cry; 'is it possible you are here? They never told me. I was never so glad about anything in all my life.'

'My pretty,' says the old woman brokenly, 'no more was I. Come in, Miss Ruth, and rest; you look like a ghost, so ill and thin, my lovey, as the captain said, you was; but we will soon get you right again now.'

And so she leads me upstairs; and with the same gentle loving hands as of yore takes off my hat, mourns over the absence of my hair, and ends by announcing her belief that the little curls which adorn my head in its place are ten times more becoming; and that, in fact, I look lovely in her eyes under any and all circumstances. And having settled that question to her entire satisfaction, and given me countless hugs and kisses, I go downstairs and thank Miss Allington with all my heart for her goodness.

'My dear child,' she says, kissing me, 'there is positively nothing to thank me for; you must have had a maid, you know, and I thought you would prefer the one you have to a stranger.'

'Prefer to have nursie? I think, Miss

Allington, I am just the happiest girl in the world.'

'What do you think of Cyril's taste in the selection of this house?' asks Miss Allington, smiling at the quiet figure standing at the window. 'He came down here and hired it for me for three months; it was very good of him to take all the trouble of sending down the servants, etc., off my hands.'

'I think it is perfection,' I say, drawing a long breath; 'and—and Cyril too——'

He turns round quickly.

'What is that about Cyril?' he asks. But Miss Allington is leaving the room, and she does not hear.

'You will be going away to-morrow, I suppose?' I say, joining him at the window.

'Yes; probably before you are awake,' smiling sadly. 'I am no more use here, and I have accepted MacHarness's invitation, and the care of my fair charge as well; so I must go now.'

'I wonder if she will be a nice girl?' I say musingly. 'A pleasant companion, I mean, who will not bore you.'

'Charming, I have no doubt,' sarcastically; 'ladies always are.'

'You will see a good deal of her whilst you are in Scotland.'

'That will entirely depend upon if I like her."

'Yes.'

After a pause.

'You will write and tell us all about it —what sport you have, and how you are enjoying yourself, and—and everything?'

'And you will write too?' he questions eagerly.

'Yes, if I have anything to say.'

Another pause.

'When shall we see you again?' I ask.

'Whenever you want me, you know I shall always be ready.'

'Yes; but,' awkwardly, 'I mean, when shall you come without being specially asked? In a month, two, three months? When?'

'I cannot tell,' he answers; 'so much may happen before then.'

* * * * *

'So this is good-bye'—Cyril is sayir two hours later, as he holds my hand his—'really good-bye!'

The pale moon has risen over the splashing foaming sea.

As we stand under the shade of the rose-crowned veranda, we can hear the waves surging and splashing against the rocks, and making the tiny pebbles race each other like children at play. No sound but this breaks the stillness; this, and the sound of Cyril's voice.

His head is turned away from me, so that I cannot see his face.

'I hate good-byes,' I say, with a touch of my old petulant manner. 'Why need we say them at all?'

'*Au revoir*, then.'

'I hate that too, it is only one degree less wretched.'

'It is very good of you to mind saying one or the other,' he says, steadying his

voice with an effort. 'Since you dislike both so much, we will not say anything.'

'I must thank you for all your goodness to me.'

'I hate thanks from you as much as you hate saying good-bye, I think,' he says, half turning round: 'they are so undeserved. If you will think of me sometimes, that will be more to me than ten thousand thanks.'

'Yes, of course I shall think of you, sporting over the heather with Miss— your travelling companion, you know,' I say lightly.

'Yes,' he acquiesces, in a dreary tone; 'that will be delightful, will not it?'

Then, as I make a movement to go in, he says, turning and looking at me for the first time :

'Cannot you stay just five minutes longer?'

'Yes, if you like.'

He wraps my shawl closer round me. Then—

'I want to ask your forgiveness for what I said the other day in the garden. I could not help it. You will try' (with an effort), 'to forget and forgive it, won't you?'

'Why should I forget it?' I ask. 'I have not too many friends that I should want to forget, or—or——'

'Then you have forgiven me, and we are still friends,' he cries brightly.

'Friends always,' I say. Then, with a sickly smile: 'Well, it is a horrid word; but I suppose I must say it, nevertheless —good-bye.'

He takes my hand once more, and raising it to his lips, says solemnly :

'God bless and keep you, dear, for ever and ever.'

And pushing the French window open for me to enter the house, he strides away through the heavily scented garden, and vaulting lightly over the railings, disappears from sight.

CHAPTER VIII.

'Journeys end in lovers meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know.'

A WHOLE delicious month of idleness, spent in lazily watching the splashing of the crested waves—reading the last new books, and listening to the soft murmur of the ever-restless sea.

And now my cheeks are pale no longer. I think the roses outside my window must have kissed them while I slept, and left some of their bright bloom behind; anyway, as I walk along the pier, beside Miss Allington, I feel in every fibre of my

being that I am better and stronger since I came. I hardly know myself, I am so unspeakably, serenely happy.

'How much I miss Cyril!' says Miss Allington. 'I am sure from his bright letters that he is enjoying himself, and I feel very selfish to want him back, but Cyril is so much to me. Ruth,' rather wistfully; 'it would be nice to have him here now, would not it?'

I turn away my head as I answer:

'Yes. I wish he were here, but perhaps he is happier where he is.'

'Who is that coming towards us?' says Miss Allington. 'Surely it must be Lady Chambers.'

'Lady Chambers,' I repeat. 'Oh! Miss Allington, I knew her when we lived at Notley, and one evening I met her at Sir

John Trevor's, and *then* she did not know me.'

'That is very likely,' says Miss Allington, with a little low laugh. 'She is most conveniently short-sighted; as she is here, I suppose we must speak to her.'

Her ladyship is a tall, thin woman, with hard features, and a stereotyped smile and a masculine voice. She is dressed in a yachting costume, which sits jauntily upon her, and is at least ten years too young for her.

Lady Chambers raises her gold-rimmed glasses to her eyes with one hand, and extends the other to Miss Allington.

'Is it positively you?' she exclaims playfully; 'this is indeed a welcome surprise; how *charmed* Sir Frederic will be!'

Sir Frederic is her husband.

'I think you know Miss Fane,' says Miss Allington.

'Oh yes, I believe I do,' extending the tips of her fingers towards me. 'I think you were governess at Sir John Trevor's, were not you, a short time since? Very sad, the children dying of fever—I did not know Miss Allington had engaged a companion. Very nice for you.'

'You have made a mistake altogether,' says Miss Allington, very clearly and distinctly. 'Miss Fane has taken compassion upon a lonely old woman, and consented to stay with me always, in the capacity of my adopted daughter.'

'I am very glad to hear it,' cries Lady Chambers, dropping her eyeglass. 'I re-

member, Miss Fane (may I call you Ruth ?), ah! so well'—tapping my hand with her parasol—'going to luncheon at your poor grandfather's, and seeing you, quite a little child, but such a lovely child! I remember remarking to Sir Frederic at the time: "That child ought to be a princess;" and Sir Frederic replied: "She has almost as good blood in her veins as if she were." Now I want you to make me a promise, both of you.'

'What is it?' asks Miss Allington.

'Why, I want you to come to the yacht to-morrow evening; she is lying just off the pier. The young people of our party are going to have a little dance on deck—it will be the very thing to suit this young lady.'

'What do you say, Ruth? Do you

feel quite equal to it?' asks Miss Allington.

'Yes, I think so, thank you,' I answer; 'I should like to go.'

'That is right. Sir Frederic will never forgive me if you do not come; so mind you do not forget—seven o'clock.'

* * * * *

'Although it is what I call a quaker colour, Miss Ruth,' says nursie profoundly, 'I am not going for to say that pale grey don't suit you, because there's no doubt you look well in anything; but still, if you put a bit of crimson somewhere about it I should like it better.'

I am dressed for the dance, and in ten minutes' time we shall be on our way to the pier.

'Well, if it will please you, nursie,' I

say smiling, 'I will wear a crimson rose. No,' hesitating and turning my blushing face away from her, 'I will have a bit of heather instead. I—I like it best;' and I take a little bunch out of the glass on my dressing-table, and put it in my belt.

'You are never going to wear that colourless stuff now,' cries nursie in disgust. 'A faded bit of a thing that the captain sent all the way from Scotland two days ago; the rose is far better: look in the glass, Miss Ruth, and judge for yourself.'

And I do look in the glass, and see a tall lithe figure which can claim none of the indulgences of an invalid, for the sharp angles and bony corners have entirely disappeared. A tall lithe figure clad from

head to foot in soft, sombre grey, no ornaments, frills or flounces, only a single bunch of white Scotch heather in her belt. With a smile I turn away.

'I think I shall do, nursie,' I say, kissing her. 'I am going to enjoy myself to-night, you know; mind you think of me,' and I trip lightly down-stairs.

In the hall I meet Miss Allington. In a moment her quick eyes see the bunch of heather, and as she draws me to her and kisses me, saying:

'My darling, I am so proud of my child to-night,' I hear that there is a little unsteadiness in her voice, and something very like tears in her eyes.

The yacht presents a very gay scene to our view: Chinese lanterns, flags, flowers

everywhere, gaily dressed ladies, fancifully dressed gentlemen, and above the hum of voices, and the gentle ripple of the unusually calm water, the discordant scraping of fiddles being coaxed into tune.

Miss Allington and I are affectionately greeted by our hostess, who is resplendent in a great variety of colours: the costume is a little loud, but no doubt unimpeachably fashionable.

'You dear good creature,' she is saying, still retaining my hand and giving it unpleasant squeezes at intervals, 'how we have been watching for you' (this was certainly a polite exaggeration). 'Sir Frederic is positively dying to see you, and renew his acquaintance with the dear little girl he remembers so well—are you not, Sir Frederic?'

This, to a stout middle-aged man standing by, deeply engrossed in a horsey conversation with a horsey young man.

'Delighted I'm sure,' murmurs Sir Frederic, who looks very much the reverse. 'How do you do, Miss Allington? Glad to see you, Miss Fane. Charming evening, is not it?' and he returns to the horsey young man and the interrupted conversation as before.

'Here come those naughty—naughty people!' cries Lady Chambers playfully; and when I raise my eyes the yacht seems to roll and lurch, and my head turns round dizzily as from afar away I hear Lady Chambers say:

'Sir Jeffery, I believe you know Miss Allington and Miss Fane?'

Mechanically I feel my cold fingers held for a minute in a firm strong clasp, and released before I have realised quite what has happened.

Then, 'How glad I am to see you,' Florence Trevor's voice says quite close to my ear. 'Dear Lady Chambers has been telling me all about it,' in a confidential whisper; 'you naughty girl not to tell us who you were—I have a great mind not to forgive you.' Then, in a concerned voice: 'Are you quite well again? You have no idea how tortured with anxiety we were about you; in fact, I really believe it was principally that that made poor mamma so ill. You cannot think how we longed to come and nurse you; but our London doctor positively forbade it.'

'Thank you, I am quite strong now,' I

say with an effort. 'I hope Lady Trevor and Sir John are quite well?'

'Mamma is far from well, I am sorry to say—papa much as usual.'

'I thought you were going abroad before now,' I say, to fill up an awkward pause.

'So we were; but dear Lady Chambers was so awfully kind: she asked me to have a little cruise with her first, and under the circumstances it proved too irresistible. Have you seen Lord Selwin yet?'

'No,' I answer, looking up; 'is he here?'

'Yes; don't you see him, standing by Sir Frederic?'

I do see him now, for he has sauntered up with his glass in his eye, and is extending a jewelled hand towards me.

'Ah! how de do, Miss Fane?' he says; 'awfully glad to see you. I heard you had been ill; hope awfully you're better. Miss Trevor, may I have the pleasure of this dance?'

'I shall be very happy,' says Florence, raising a radiant face to his.

'Thanks, awfully,' remarks his lordship, and they go slowly away together.

And all this time Jeffery has been standing awkwardly by, with a half-doubtful, half-expectant look on his handsome face.

'You have been ill,' he says abruptly; 'won't you sit down? Standing for so long is tiring.'

'Thank you,' I say, following him; 'I am quite well now.'

A most uncomfortable pause ensues.

'Have you been down here long?' he asks carelessly.

'Yes, about a month.'

'I only joined these people yesterday. I have been shooting in Scotland since the twelfth.'

'Indeed; I hope you had good sport?'

'Yes—splendid; I never remember having better, I think.' Then, looking straight before him over the shining rippling sea: 'Walters is up in the north. I saw him yesterday.'

'Yes; he is staying with Mr. MacHarness. Miss Allington heard from him two days ago.'

'I was staying with MacHarness too.'

Suddenly a burning desire seizes me to ask about Cyril; if he is well and happy, and enjoying himself *very* much; for be-

tween me and that handsome, indolent proud face, there rises the passionate, beseeching, grey eyes—the eyes that only become more infinitely tender through suffering; a brave, noble face that tells of a soul which has gone through the fire and not been found wanting.

Suddenly Jeffery turns to me with a smile. Some of the reserve and constraint has gone out of his manner now as he says:

'Will you dance with me? I don't think you have forgotten how. Just this once, any way,' as I hesitate, 'for the sake of "auld lang syne."'

And then his arm slips round my waist, and we are off.

When we stop, the voice of Florence Trevor falls on our ears. She is talking to a florid lady in blue.

'Oh, yes, Mrs. Le Grande, I assure you the Fanes took quite the best position in the county. As to dearest Ruth, I have always looked upon her as a sister, and always shall' (with emphasis). 'The dearest girl, I assure you, Mrs. Le Grande, in all the world.'

'I quite agree with that,' says Jeffery in a low voice, bending down his handsome face to mine.

'And mean it equally!' I reply curtly. 'I want to sit down beside Miss Allington, please.'

So he makes his bow and goes, and the next minute he is looking into another pair of eyes with the old rapturous glances—whispering into another ear the same soft tender nothings that he has whispered so often into mine.

But the sight does not hurt me. I only fall to wondering greatly what it is that is *gone*. There is something missing that I fancied was there. And yet, can there be? He is just as handsome, perhaps even more so; his glance is just as tender; his voice just as sweet. What is it? What is it?

Then I look at Miss Allington. There is a sad, sorrowful look in her face; but how kindly she smiles at me—how anxious she is that I should enjoy myself and be happy!

'Do you remember,' asks Florence, 'how my expectations were raised in the spring *àpropos* of an engagement? Well, my dear, it all ended in smoke. I must say I think Sir Jeffery behaved rather badly to Lady Mabel; but I always say when girls pursue a man they must expect it. Here

is Lord Selwin again. I really cannot give him another dance; it will look so awfully conspicuous,' with a giggle.

But his lordship is not coming to claim the willing hand of his would-be partner. This time the honour falls to me.

And now the evening is really drawing to a close. The lanterns are swaying to and fro in the rising breeze, the flags flutter faintly, and the moon rises in her pale majesty in the fast darkening sky.

'This is the last waltz,' says Sir Jeffery, coming up; 'may I have it?'

Even amid that subtly enchanting scene —even with the soft sweet music of the Blue 'Danube' (Cyril's Blue 'Danube') ringing in my ears, I am still groping blindly to find the something that has gone. What is it? What is it?

From time to time I raise my eyes to my partner's face, but it is not there; I can find no clue to my problem. I know nothing, can explain nothing, but that there is a blank.

'When shall I see you again?' he asks, pulling his brown moustache. 'To-morrow? May I call to-morrow?'

'Yes, we shall be glad to see you,' I answer politely. Then: 'There were a great many people staying at Mr. MacHarness's, I suppose — were not there?'

'Oh yes; a house full.'

'Nice people?'

'Yes; extremely, some of them. One, a Miss Nelson, was *very* nice.'

'And pretty?'

He laughs merrily.

'She reminded me a little of you.'

'Had she been there long?' I ask.

'She went on the tenth, I believe; but really I don't know much about her. You must ask Walters—he travelled with her, and knows all about it'—laughing still—'they are great friends.'

'I hope Captain Walters is quite well, and enjoying himself,' I say, with a choking sensation in my throat.

'Oh, dear, yes, I never saw him look better; and as for enjoying himself, I refer you to Miss Nelson.'

The music is hushed now; the gay voices are silent. The moon is shining very brightly—so brightly indeed, that if you leaned over the side of the yacht you would see a little bunch of white heather drifting out to sea.

CHAPTER IX.

* * * *

'I steal by lawns and grassy plots,
I slide by hazel covers,
I mow the sweet forget-me-nots
That grow for happy lovers.

'And out again I curve and flow,
To join the brimming river;
For men may come, and men may go,
But I go on for ever.'

The Brook.

A WEEK has passed, and the *Firefly* is still at her moorings.

It has been a very pleasant, gay week; such a glimpse into the old life that

I sometimes pinch myself to see if I am really awake, and if it is all true.

And now on the morrow the yacht and her gay crew sail away, and Miss Allington and I settle down once more to our sweet, peaceful, restful life. To-morrow? yes. But to-day?

The sun is high in the heavens—the busy hum of bees fills the still summer air; everything in nature has put on her holiday garb, and for the best of all reasons. Miss Allington has invited the crew of the *Firefly* to a picnic.

With my eyes on the clock I am listening for the first ring of the bell which will announce their arrival. With a sharp discordant sound it vibrates through the house, and the next minute they are laughing, talking, shaking hands, nearly

filling the room, and tumbling over each other's trains in glorious confusion.

'How shall we go?' says Miss Allington, when the first greetings are over. 'Supposing we send the young people first—Lord Selwin, Miss Trevor, Sir Jeffery and Ruth in the dog-cart, the others in the waggonette and phaeton, and we follow in the landau?'

Everyone agrees that will be the very thing, delightful, etc.; and we are soon off.

Lord Selwin, being short-sighted, declines to drive. Miss Trevor, who is not short-sighted, pleads to be allowed to sit at the back also, as she is so 'awfully nervous' if she looks at the horse.

So it comes about that Sir Jeffery and I are sitting side by side, destined to be

tête-à-tête for a considerable time. We have seen a great deal of each other during the past week, and the first rawness has passed away; we are very friendly, almost at ease with each other now. I begin to think our last meeting has passed from his memory, that he has *forgotten* it; anyway, that it will never be mentioned between us again.

'What a perfect day it is!' he says, looking towards the hills we can see before us; 'it is our own fault if we do not enjoy ourselves, and yet,' with a sigh, 'one so seldom enjoys anything *very* much.'

'Oh, don't you?' I say bluntly. 'What a very discontented person you must be; I enjoy *everything*—at least,' correcting myself, 'everything that is pleasant.'

'Are you enjoying yourself now?' look-

ing at me inquiringly out of the dreamy brown eyes.

'Of course I am; why should not I be?'

'Oh! there is no reason at all why you should not!' looking away again; 'only I thought you would prefer it if some one else was driving.'

'I don't care a straw who is driving,' I return, 'as long as our ultimate destination does not prove to be the ditch.'

'Thank you.'

We are silent for a considerable time after this—I engaged in trying to button my glove, my companion angrily biting his brown moustache. Then we fall into common places once more, and after about an hour's drive find ourselves at the lovely shaded nook chosen for the picnic.

The servants have arrived before us,

and now take charge of our steeds, cloaks and carriages, while we ramble off in search of an appetite for lunch.

When we return in twos and threes we find the cloth already spread, and the elder members of the party, ensconced in the shadiest place they can find, awaiting us.

'Awfully hot,' says Lord Selwin, coming up languidly.

'Yes; rather,' I agree, fanning myself.

Jeffery, still rather dignified and injured, sits down beside me on the grass.

'Don't you see Miss Trevor wants you, Selwin?' he says coolly.

'Does she though, really,' putting his glass in his eye. 'Pwobably wants something to eat: she generally does.'

'You had better go and ask her.'

'There is no corkscrew!' cries Sir Frederic, in dismay.

Poor man, he looks terribly hot and thirsty.

'How stupid,' says Miss Allington. 'What shall we do?'

'If you are all looking for a corkscrew,' drawls Lord Selwin, unexpectedly coming to the rescue, 'I can lend you one. It's very fwagile, mind; but combined with a buttonhook, awfully useful, only you must mind and get the right thing for the purpose; if you're not careful about that, it's awfully confusing.'

'I should quite imagine it would be,' says Jeffery, with an ironical laugh. 'Here, Chambers,' throwing it across the cloth. 'Mind you don't try to pull out the cork with Selwin's button-hook.'

There is a general laugh, and then we 'fall to' in earnest, and do ample justice to Miss Allington's lunch.

Jeffery, feeling more amiable, condescends to address a few observations to me. We talk of pictures, books, theatres, and all the time I am trying to pick up the broken thread—trying to find out what is missing in my perfect hero of a few months ago—trying to find out why my hand does not thrill at his touch, why I can look at him frankly, steadily, without that strange flutter at my heart; but try as I may, it is a blank to me still.

A shout from one of the gentlemen makes me look up.

'By Jove, what's that?' says Lord Selwin, putting his glass in his eye, and

stopping short on his way to Miss Trevor with a second plate of lobster salad.

'You have put your foot into it this time!' roars Sir Frederic.

'Into what, my dear fellow?' cries Lord Selwin.

'The apple-pie!' laughs Lady Chambers.

'You really don't mean that,' says his lordship. 'I'm awfully sworry. Can't I wepair the damage?'

The damage is repaired by the footman removing the injured pie altogether; and then by twos and threes we again stroll off.

'If it is all one to you whom you walk as well as whom you drive with,' says Jeffery stiffly, 'perhaps you will have no objection to walking with me.'

'Not the least' I answer.

And we go.

'Sit down,' says my companion, pointing to the trunk of a gnarled old tree lying in our path. 'It is much too hot to do a constitutional, or anything else but——'

'Go to sleep,' I suggest, laughing. 'Pray have a siesta, if you like.'

'I have not the least desire, thank you,' still dignified. 'Why do you take the words out of my mouth, and turn everything I mean into something I do not mean? I wonder if you can be serious for five consecutive minutes.'

'Yes, of course I can,' raising my eyes to the angry brown ones above me. 'What are you so cross about?'

He seizes a handful of bright blue forget-me-nots growing beside the rippling stream at our feet, and throws them one by one away.

'Don't do that,' I cry, stretching out my hand towards the few remaining ones. 'Poor pretty flowers, I don't like to see them die.'

He drops the flowers, and takes my hand.

'I want you to tell me something,' he says, bending down that he may look into my face. 'Do you believe that a woman exists who can keep a promise? Do you believe a woman's word is worth that?' He snaps his fingers as he speaks.

'Yes,' I say stoutly; 'I do believe it.'

'So did I once, but,' bitterly, 'you undeceived me.'

'You are wrong,' I say unsteadily. 'I did *not* break my promise.

'Your promise to meet Walters? No!'

'My promise to meet you,' I say, the

blood mounting to my cheeks, forehead, and ears, and bathing them in a flood of crimson fire. 'I never promised to meet *him* in my life. It was all a mistake from beginning to end. Not that it is any consequence,' drawing my head up proudly; 'but I do not like you to think I broke my word.'

'How was it that you were there at that time, together, then?' he asks, still doubting.

'Miss Trevor kept me at home altering her dress till long after the appointed time; and when I ran through the field, a horrid bull pursued me; if Cy— Captain Walters had not been there, I should probably have been killed; he dragged me through the gate, and then I fainted. When I came round you were gone.'

'I think I was half mad with rage and misery, Ruth,' still holding my hand tightly. 'How is it that when I am with you I forget everything else in the world? I am jealous of the wind that blows upon you, I am jealous of the dog, when your sweet lips rest on his head. When I was away I think I hated you,' savagely. 'I know when I came down here I meant to pay you out for your treatment of me, and the moment I saw you the old fascination came back as strongly as ever, and made me your slave. I think, dear, if you would take me in hand for the rest of my life, you would make a better man of me. Will you try?'

So it has come. That longed-for blissful moment, that glimpse into Paradise.

Why do not I hide my face on his broad

shoulder, and so give myself into his keeping for evermore?

He has raised my hand to his lips, and is murmuring eternal devotion to its pink palm.

'Don't,' I say, drawing it away. 'I have changed my mind—I cannot marry you.'

'Don't play with me, child,' he says earnestly. 'If you knew how much this was to me, you would be more merciful.'

'I am not playing with you,' I say, looking steadily at him. 'I *mean* it. I thought I loved you once, but either you are changed, or I loved an imaginary hero. The man I loved would not have gone away as you did: he would have tried to see me again, when he knew how probable

it was that I might be prevented keeping my promise.'

'And when he saw you in the arms of another man?' questions Jeffery bitterly.

'Yes, even then,' I say stoutly, with my face all one ruddy glow. '*My* hero would have stayed to find out the truth. Do you know, I heard it was talked of in London that you were going to marry Lady Mabel Causton. Florence Trevor was even preparing to be bridesmaid. Did you expect me to break my heart for a man who could so soon forget?'

'It is not fair of you to talk like this,' breaks out Jeffery petulantly. 'Was I not willing, anxious to make the greatest social sacrifice for your sake? Was I not willing to marry you as Lady Trevor's

governess, and introduce you to the world as my wife?'

'You ought to be very grateful to me for not allowing you to make the sacrifice,' I say, the contempt I feel coming into my voice.

'I did not mean that,' he says quickly. 'Why do you make me almost mad with your cold queenly beauty? I scarcely know what I say, but,' relapsing into the old caressing way once more, '*Cara mia*, if you will forget and forgive, I will try to be worthy of you, dear; indeed I will. Do you believe me?'

'I think you mean it now,' I say, looking at the handsome pleading face. 'But it is not in you to mean it always; you would weary of me in three months, and wish you had not made the sacrifice, for,'

smiling, 'I am exactly the same individual as I was when I was Lady Trevor's governess, you know.'

'Try me,' he cries, ignoring the latter part of my sentence. 'Try me.'

'No,' I say firmly. 'I know too well what the end of the experiment would be; besides,' in a low voice, 'I do not love you.'

'You did once,' he says, still pleadingly. 'I know you did once.'

'Yes,' I answer frankly. 'I loved you better than my own life; but a dead love would not satisfy you, would it?'

'*You* would satisfy me.'

I shake my head.

'In what way have I changed?' he cries. 'I am just the same man as I was

six months ago, and you loved me then.'

'That is what I have been trying to find out ever since we met again, and I cannot tell.'

'It is you who are changed, not I,' he says bitterly; 'perhaps,' with a curl of his handsome lips, 'you have been comparing me with some one else, and I have come off second best.'

Jeffery has solved the mystery for me now. He has picked up the broken thread, answered the perplexing question that has been worrying me for so long.

I have been comparing him with some one else, and he has come off second best.

'And if it were so,' I say, raising

a radiant glowing face to his, 'you would not wish my answer to be anything but what it is.'

'No,' he says, in a low voice; 'you are right. I must be first or nothing.'

We are silent. Jeffery has buried his face in his hands.

The birds sing gaily in the branches over our heads, the water ripples and bubbles over the stones at our feet, the long waving ferns and slender reeds bow in majestic obeisance to each other.

'I think you are right,' says Jeffery in a low voice, without raising his head; 'he is a better man than I am. He will be more worthy of you than I could ever be; only I wish he had not sent me here—I could have borne it better if I had not seen you again.'

'He sent you here!' I cry, my heart beating and thumping almost to suffocation. 'Did he tell you I still *cared* for you?'

'No—no; he only said you were here, and he wished I would run down and take a peep at you; he thought you might be rather dull: but I knew what he meant. I think he knew there had once been some misunderstanding between us, and thought our meeting might set it right; it was he who told me you had been ill.'

'Was it? Oh, Sir Jeffery, you do not know how good he was!' I cry, clasping my hands. 'You can never know how much he did for me, how brave and splendid he was. I think,' with enthusiasm, 'he is just the best man in the whole world.'

'And if,' says Jeffery, suddenly raising his head, 'he falls in love with Miss Nelson?'

'Then,' I reply bravely, all the sunshine dying out of my face, and big tears gathering in my eyes, 'then I shall pray that he may be as happy as he deserves to be; as happy as I know he will be.'

* * * * *

We have joined the others now—Jeffery and I.

'Where have you been?' asks Florence Trevor. 'How doleful you both look.'

'Sitting under the trees by the brook,' says Jeffery, cutting her short; 'but we found it rather monotonous—at least, Miss Fane did, so we came back.'

'You were some time discovering the fact. Well, how are we to go home?' as the carriages come up. 'As we came, I suppose; what do you say, Lord Selwin?'

'Awfully jolly, I should say,' replies his lordship.

I do not much relish the prospect of another *tête-à-tête* with Jeffery, but there is no help for it. He looks gloomy and silent, and helps me into the dog-cart without a word.

We are off at last. Such a cavalcade of us, all laughing and talking with the exception of Jeffery and myself.

'It is turning colder,' I remark lamely for the sake of something to say.

'Will you have your cloak on?'

'No, thank you.'

'What nonsense, if you are cold!' in an icy tone, and wrapping it round me as he speaks. 'What is the good of killing yourself?'

'I have no desire to do that, thank you,' rather meekly. Then: 'I hope you will have a good breeze for your cruise to-morrow.'

'Thank you; one that will take us a long distance in a short space of time—that is the sort of breeze I want.'

A long pause.

'Perhaps we shall see you in London next season,' I say, making a noble effort to set the conversational ball once more roling.

'Who do you mean by *we*?'

'Miss Allington and myself; she says we shall go to her town-house in May.'

'May is a long way off yet.'

'Home is not,' I cry joyfully, as we come in sight of the rose-crowned veranda. 'I do believe I can see nursie looking out of the window.'

'How glad you seem that our drive is at an end!' he says, helping me down, (the others are to drive to the pier, the servants having gone on before to take charge of the empty carriages).

'Not at all,' I say politely; for Florence Trevor and Lord Selwin can hear our entire conversation now.

'I suppose this is good-bye?' he says, wringing my hand till my fingers tingle; then, almost before I can say good-bye to the others, he has sprung into his seat and driven off.

CHAPTER X.

'Half veiled in golden light of shimmering air,
The landscape stretches wondrous fair—
No paling beauty anywhere:
Nature is in her prime.'

Poems of England.

A BIG thick letter, directed in a queer irregular hand, lies in my plate.

The September sunlight is dancing over its bulky proportions, and making the odd characters traced upon its cover stand out more clearly than they otherwise would.

Glorious golden September! To my thinking the sweetest, if also, on account

of its fading glories, the saddest month of the whole year.

On fleet restless wings the partridges fly across the stubble, where but a few short weeks ago was a mass of ripe golden corn, swaying and bending as the soft wind whispered how soon, along with the bright red poppies and the ragged-robin, it too must be laid low, and its place know it no more.

But all this time my letter lies unopened in my hand. I take it to the window (for I am the first to make my appearance in the breakfast-room) and break the seal. Its bulky appearance is accounted for by the principal enclosure, being the review of a book that I have expressed a wish to read; then I open the solitary sheet of paper along with it.

'My dear Ruth,

'I send the review which I know you are anxious to see; don't trouble to return it.

'We have had, as I told you, capital sport. Most of the people have left now. All, in fact, but the Nelsons and myself.

'I propose taking my departure on Friday next, and if Miss Allington can do with me, I hope to run down for a few days before I knock over the partridges in my own preserves. I suppose you have been enjoying yourself lately? The Chambers generally keep one from going to sleep.

'I conclude, although you did not say anything about yourself in your last letter, that you must be quite well and strong again. Don't omit such an important

piece of information when you write next. Can I do anything for you in town on my way?

'Your friend,

'CYRIL WALTERS.'

'P.S.—The Nelsons have asked me to go home with them. Tell me what I should do.'

Friday! then, if all is well, he will be here on Saturday, I say to myself, with a quick throb of joy at my heart. We shall see his bright kind face again, hear his light-springing step and his gay voice—for something tells me it will be gay. Perhaps Miss Nelson's presence has wrought the change? Well, so much the better. I think, in the warm September sunlight, a little prayer goes up from my heart

that if it is so she may learn to value the man she has won. Then the last words he spoke to me come back with their old sweet music:

'God bless you, dear, and keep you for ever and ever.'

'Why, what is all this about?' says Miss Allington's voice just behind me. 'An April day face in September! that will never do.'

'I did not know it was,' I say, blushing furiously. 'The sun was in my eyes, I think.'

'Oh! that was it. Come and have some breakfast, and leave the sun to his own devices, then.'

'Cyril is coming on Saturday,' I say, unable to bottle up my news any longer. 'Will you read the letter?'

'That *is* good news,' she cries joyfully; 'but how about the postscript—what shall you say, Ruth?' looking at me wistfully.

'I fancy he would rather go back with the Nelsons,' I say; 'only he thinks we want him. Sir Jeffery said he got on very well with them, and that he and Miss Nelson were a great deal together, and were very good friends.'

'Sir Jeffery told you that, did he?' asks Miss Allington, pouring out a second cup of coffee.

'Yes; he was staying there with them, you know.'

'Ruth, would you mind telling me, dear, if there is anything between you and Sir Jeffery now? I fancied he was anxious to set the misunderstanding right when he was here.'

'I have been wanting to tell you all about it,' I say nervously; 'but I was so afraid you would tell Cyril. Promise me faithfully you will not.'

'Of course I will promise,' she answers eagerly.

'Then he—he asked me to marry him, and I said "No."'

To my unfeigned astonishment Miss Allington drops her head in her hands with a sob.

'Thank God!' she says brokenly.

And as I twine my arms about her, and bury my face on her shoulder, I think, without any more words, we understand each other's thoughts.

'You will not tell him?' I plead earnestly. 'You promised you would not.'

'You will tell him yourself some day, dear,' she says, stroking my hair. 'Until then, your secret is quite safe with me.'

And I know it.

'You will write and tell him to come?' questions Miss Allington anxiously.

'No—no!' I cry; 'I cannot do that, when, perhaps, he wants to go back with the Nelsons.'

'If I write instead, will you send a message?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Tell him we both want to see him; but that if he would *rather* accepts the Nelsons' invitation, he is to do so.'

CHAPTER XI.

'Then they clung about
The old man's neck, and kissed him many times.
And all the man was broken with remorse.'

TENNYSON.

ONE by one the shadows have deepened on the sun-illumined horizon. One by one the delicate scent-ladened blossoms have closed their eyes; one by one the blithe songs of the birds are hushed, and as I gaze lovingly on the last fading rays of daylight, the words of the children's hymn come into my head.

'Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh;
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky.

'Now the darkness gathers,
Stars begin to peep,
Birds and beasts and flowers
Soon will be asleep.'

I am alone, lolling back in the low basket-chair, revelling in idleness. Suddenly the door opens; I give a little start, for I have not heard the knock, and come back from the clouds.

It is the footman who has entered, and is presenting me with a card on a silver-tray. I take it up leisurely, and look at the name inscribed thereon:

'Mr. Herbert Fane.'

I scarcely know what I feel, I scarcely know where I am, as I ask where the gentleman is.

He tells me in the drawing-room; and

then I go to face my kinsman for the first time in my life.

A tall, white-haired, heavily-bearded man, muffled up in a great-coat, is standing against the chimneypiece.

In the fading light I can see his face but dimly; that is as much of it as is visible.

He knows I have entered the room, but he does not raise his eyes; when I bow stiffly and request him to sit down, he never even looks at me.

For the first time in my life a ray of pity steals into my heart for this man; I think his cross was a heavy one; he did not bear it very bravely, perhaps, but to a nature like his it was not a light burden.

'Can you guess what has brought me

to England?' he asks, in a hard, metallic voice.

'To see your property; probably to take possession of it,' I answer coldly.

'No,' he says, 'you are wrong. A woman drove me away, and a woman has brought me back again. I came to see you.' Then, before I can reply: 'I wanted to see the woman who could face the world as a pauper in preference to asking her only living relation to help her.'

'The Fanes can work, but they cannot beg,' I answer proudly.

'They can steal,' he retorts bitterly. 'Steal the hope and happiness from a brother's life—steal the heart of the girl he loves away from him.'

'A thing which is freely, willingly given cannot be stolen,' I say, in defence of my

dead, unknown father. And yet I feel how cruel my words are to the world-worn, disappointed man before me.

There is silence; then he says, his voice growing softer and more gentle:

'That is a hard thing to say, and you are a brave woman to say it to me.'

'Forgive me then,' I cry humbly. 'I did not mean to be hard. I know that no words or thoughts of ours can affect them now, for they are dead; but surely it is a poor revenge to speak cruelly and unkindly of them.'

'Yes, they are all dead,' he says; and there is a piteous ring in his voice. 'All *dead!*'

I think nothing could have gone so deep down into my heart as that desolate cry, it was so hopeless, so despairing.

He seems to me no longer the stern, unforgiving brother—the undutiful, heartless son; only a poor, weak, erring mortal, tired and weary, the last failing branch of the good old tree that has weathered so many storms.

And then I go to him. I kneel down beside him, and twine my arms about him, and put my face against his.

'Will you try to love me a little? as I will try to love you very much,' I say softly. 'Love me a little, for the sake of those that are gone.'

'My little Ruth—my little Ruth,' he murmurs, his strong frame convulsed with sobs; but I know he speaks not to me. Oh no! but to *her*, who is beyond the sound of his voice—to her who will never hear it more, never more.

Oh! what were you doing, my pale dead mother, to throw away such love as this? Could you comprehend the depth and the strength of it, I wonder? Surely—surely not, or you could not have done it. You thought, perhaps, in your ignorance, that he would get over it and be happy with some one else; as many have thought when they have taken all the taste out of another's life—when they have sent a soul to a living death. It is a fatal mistake: eight may get over it, but the ninth is lost body and soul.

I dare not break the silence, for I know there is a mighty struggle going on in his heart; so with my arms still about him, I pray that God will have pity and mercy upon him, and give him peace.

He raises his head.

'Let me look at you, Ruth,' he says brokenly. 'I want to see if you are like her—like your mother.'

And then the tired eyes meet mine hungrily, cravingly.

'Yes,' he says at length, 'you are just like her; but you are pitiful, and you are kind. Don't send me away, child; I am a broken down old man, and not much good to a bright young girl like you; but let me see you sometimes—the sight of you makes me forgiving and humble. God knows! perhaps some day it may make me good too.'

'We will be a great deal to each other always,' I say, kissing him. 'Father and daughter, not uncle and niece.'

'I have brought something for you, Ruth,' he says, taking a large envelope out

of his pocket and giving it to me. 'You ought to have had it long ago; you told Matthews you would accept nothing from me if I offered it, but you will not refuse this—in the greatness and pity of your heart you will take it.'

'Yes—yes!' I cry, 'of course I will, whatever it is;' and then I break the seal.

It is a deed of gift, making Notley Hall mine at once and for ever.

I think I cry my thanks out with my head on his shoulder; perhaps I do not thank him at all—but I know when Miss Allington comes in she is considerably astonished to find me in the arms of a white-haired old gentleman, laughing and crying alternately, and a half-open parchment lying on the floor beside us.

Dear Miss Allington! I think it is the happiest day but one in her pure, gentle, loving life—the life that has been spent for others.

And my uncle? As I move about the room, play with the dog, or, in fact, do or say anything, his eyes follow me jealously—lovingly; he seems as if he could not look at anyone or anything else, and when at last he reluctantly prepares to go, he says, putting his hand on my head:

'Matthews told me all about your life since you left the old home, Ruth. If I could only undo it! if that terrible time could only be blotted out!'

'I would not have it blotted out for anything,' I say earnestly. 'It has been the best lesson I could have had. All I regret is that I bore it so badly and so

impatiently. It has taught me many things, and one is the number of my real friends; they are not a large company,' smiling.

'You will have plenty now,' says my uncle, smiling too.

'Yes,' I answer; 'and I shall know how to value them.'

And then there comes into my mind that solemn compact which I entered into one winter's evening long ago, with those dear grey eyes fixed so earnestly on my face—that compact which made us, 'Always friends, for ever and ever.'

CHAPTER XII.

'O eyes long laid in happy sleep!
O happy sleep that lightly fled!
O happy kiss that woke thy sleep!
O love, thy kiss would wake the dead!'
The Daydream.

To-MORROW he will be here! To-morrow his gay footfall will echo along the passages, and we shall know and feel his presence among us once more.

How gaily the thrush sings in that tree over yonder! How fresh is the flower-scented air as it frolics and sports in my brown locks! How happy and blithe

seems everything on this first of October!

Rover, Miss Allington's big retriever, is raising his beseeching eyes to my face, and asking in his own eloquent way to be taken for a ramble.

Rover and I are great friends; why should I disappoint the dear old fellow? I want everyone to be happy to-day; so I run indoors, tell Miss Allington where I am going, and then set off.

Along the green shady lanes we go, where the birds sing sweetest, and the blackberries in their ripe blackness hang in rich luxuriance. I like the lanes to-day; they are quiet and undisturbed. I can sit down and think my own thoughts out here to myself.

'Go along, sir!' I say, as I throw my-

self down on a mossy bank, over which a big tree stretches its mighty branches. 'Go, and tear about now to your heart's content, and "leave me alone; the dream is my own, and my heart is full of rest."' Then, laughing a clear, joyous ringing laugh, as the wondering eyes of the dog are fixed upon me, 'What is the good of spouting Miss Ingelow's sentiments to you? though you do look as if you understood everything.'

After a time I wander back again, back to the old shady garden, and throwing my hat among the daisies, shut my eyes to keep out the rays of the afternoon sun, and the next sensation I am conscious of is the flutter of a butterfly's wing—or something else, passing lightly over my lips.

With a little cry I spring up, and rub my eyes.

'I—I—did not expect you till to-morrow,' I stammer, as I become conscious that a pair of very loving grey eyes are gazing into mine.

And then I stretch out my hand to him, for I am glad, with a great gladness, to look upon his comely beauty again.

'I could not wait so long,' he says, with a low, happy laugh. 'You said I might come, you know. Are you not a little bit glad to see me?'

'Yes—very glad,' I answer, trying to keep the joy out of my voice. 'I wish we had known you were coming to-day,' I add, turning away my head; 'we would have walked to the pier to meet you.'

'Would you?' he cries, taking my white

fingers into his own, 'then you are *really* glad to see me?' incredulously.

'Of course I am,' making an unsuccessful struggle to get my hat. 'I hope you have had a pleasant time in Scotland,' I go on lamely

'O yes,' smiling; 'it was not bad. Let me get your hat,' rescuing the missing property from its daisy-bed.

'Have you seen Miss Allington?' I ask desperately. Anything to take those eager grey eyes from my face.

'Yes; she told me where to find you.'

'Then perhaps we had better go home?'

'It is only just five, and you do not dine until seven, do you?' looking at his watch. Then: 'Ruth,' rather sadly, 'are you in a great hurry to be rid of me?'

'No,' I reply, lifting shy eyes to his handsome, manly face; 'I am in no hurry at all—only—only——'

'Darling!' he cries, catching me in his arms, 'before you go another step, tell me with your own sweet truthful lips why you refused Walsingham!'

'Who told you I did?' I cry, the crimson blood dyeing my cheeks. 'Miss Allington promised not to.'

'He told me himself.'

'Did he tell you why?' I gasp. 'I mean, did he give you any reason?'

'Yes; the best of all reasons. He said you did not care for him.'

'Anything else?'

Suddenly a bright flash comes into the grey eyes.

'If there was another reason, will you

not tell it me yourself?' taking my face between his hands. 'I don't think anyone else but you could make me believe it.'

'I think you know it already,' I say, hiding my blushing countenance on his shoulder. Then, as the big moustache comes in contact with my lips, 'O Cyril! you did not do that when I was asleep, did you?'

'I could not help it,' he says apologetically. 'You seemed so fast asleep I thought you would not know, and it *might* have been my only chance. Do you remember the first time you kissed me, darling? kissed me of your own sweet will! Ah, Ruth! that kiss was the sweetest cruellest gift you ever gave me!'

'O Cyril!' I say, through a mist of tears, 'what makes you love me so? I cannot understand it! You don't know how bitterly I have repented sending you away. I don't deserve to have you back again. I tried to bear it, but I was so wretched when I thought you were forgetting me and beginning to care for Miss Nelson.'

'Miss Nelson!' he cries; 'what in the name of all that is wonderful can you be dreaming of?' Then, laughing immoderately: 'Did Walsingham tell you about our flirtation?'

'Yes,' I say, trying to disengage myself from his arms; 'he said you were great friends, and spent a great deal of time in each other's society, and that she was very nice.'

'She was *charming!*' says Cyril, teasingly.

The tears of mortification are rising to my eyes.

'So that is why you sent me a message to the effect that if I preferred going home with the Nelsons to coming here, I could?'

'Perhaps you would have done,' choking slightly.

'Well,' still teasingly, 'I don't go quite so far as that.'

'Sir Jeffery said,' I go on, sniffing in spite of myself, 'that she was something like me.'

'Did he? I don't see much resemblance; let me look at you!'

Then, discovering two big tears in my eyes:

'Why, what is the matter, darling? pray don't do that; it hurts me horribly to see you cry.'

'It's nothing,' I say dismally, 'only I wish you would not talk about her.'

'Who! Miss Nelson?'

'Yes.'

'Why, she is MacHarness's maiden aunt!' he says, laughing; 'she is about sixty—poor old thing!—and reminded me tremendously of our mutual friend, Miss MacGregor. I really believe it was owing to the resemblance that we became such good friends.'

'Is that true—*really?*'

'Really,' he answers, looking into my eyes. And I believe him. 'Do you know, darling,' he says, all the fun dying out of his eyes, and a great overwhelming love filling them instead; 'I feel so

enormously happy, I think I can realise what Pygmalion felt when his beautiful statue turned for him from stone to life.'

For answer I raise my lips to his, and I know that neither time nor space can change our love henceforth for evermore.

So all my doubts and fears are lulled to rest in those brave, faithful, arms, for his love is mine even till the voice of the Great Reaper shall bid him, '*Come.*'

Then, from the bottom of my heart, I believe he will gladly, aye joyfully, answer, 'I am ready.'

THE END.

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